The Need to Focus on Palliative Care

Why in news?

The Government's revised non-communicable diseases guidelines were criticised for the lack of focus on palliative care.

What is palliative care?

- Palliative care is the branch of medicine focusing on *improving the quality of life* and preventing suffering among those with *life-limiting illnesses.*
- It aims to identify patients at risk of over-medicalisation at the expense of quality of life and financial burden on the family.
- It is an approach to care that addresses the person as a whole, not just their disease
- Palliative care is available at any time, regardless of the stage of the illness or life expectancy whereas *Hospice care* is available only at the end of life.

Prevalence of NCD
As per ***World Health Organization (WHO)***, • **Global Scenario** - There is one death from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) every 2 seconds. • NCDs, along with mental illnesses, kill 41 million people each year across all age groups. • Of all NCD deaths, 77% are in low- income and middle-income countries (LMICs). • **Indian Scenario -** 66% of all deaths can be attributed to NCDs, with cardiovascular diseases accounting for 28% of these deaths and chronic respiratory diseases 12%. • In 2019, the report showed that India had one of the highest death rates from chronic respiratory diseases.

Why is palliative care so significant?

- **Symptom management**–Palliative care specialists may help people with symptom and pain management.
- **Improved quality of life**- As per a report, amongst the Parkinson's disorder affected people, those who received palliative care scored three points higher in the quality of life.
- **Reduced risk of depression**-Early palliative care is associated with a lower risk of depression in people newly diagnosed with advanced cancer.
- **Longer survival-** Palliative care increases the survival of people with advanced cancer as there is a link between mortality and depression.
- **Emotional Support -**Palliative care can include instructional guidance and emotional support for family members caring for a loved one with a serious illness.

What steps were taken to promote Palliative care?

- **Policy** - Only three states have implemented the palliative care policy - Kerala, Karnataka, and Maharashtra.
- Among them, *Kerala is the only state with a policy which integrates palliative care with the public health system* and it is decentralized down to the primary health care.
- **National Program for Palliative Care**- It was launched in 2012 in line with 2014 World Health Assembly Resolution for achieving universal access to palliative care as part of Universal Health Coverage (UHC).
- **NP-NCD & NCD Guidelines**- In 2023, the revised operational guidelines of National Programme for Prevention of Non-Communicable Diseases for 2023 to 2030 was released.
- **75/25 initiative-** It is an initiative in which *75 million people* with hypertension and diabetes is put on Standard Care *by 2025,* through the primary health care centres.
- **Shashakt Portal-** It was launched for *training of 40,000 primary health care medical officers* on standard treatment workflow.
- **Other programs** that has Palliative care as a component includes
    - National Program for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Cardiovascular Disease, Diabetes, and Stroke
    - National Program for Health Care of the Elderly
    - National AIDS Control Program
    - National Health Mission

What are the gaps in the revised NCD guidelines?

- **Accessibility**- Palliative care is accessible to only 1-2% of the estimated 7-10 million people who require it in the country.
- **Misconceptions**- As per *Global Atlas of Palliative Care*, in 2020, the need for palliative care was higher for non-cancer illnesses.
- However, the revised NCD operational guidelines, released in 2023, mentions palliative care is in synonym with cancer only.
- **Infrastructure deficit** – As per revised guidelines, generally palliative care service starts in district hospitals and there is no mention on home based care.
- **Lack of dedicated budget**- There is no specific budget dedicated for the palliative care.
- **Lack of awareness**- It is due to lack of awareness among policy-makers, health professionals and the public about the palliative care and its benefits it can offer to patients and health systems.
- **Indicator to assess the programme's impact**- Including an indicator to assess morphine access is a welcome move, but an indicator focusing only on patients with cancer might lead to an inaccurate assessment of coverage of services.

What lies ahead?

- The 67th World Health Assembly in 2014 called for palliative care to be integrated into health systems at all levels.
- It is high time to realise the ongoing pandemic of non-communicable diseases in India and to strengthen our palliative care services.

References

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