# When cancer hits, the cost of treatment shouldn't bite

Cancer changes a family's life in an instant. Patients and their loved ones must confront difficult decisions about treatment, finances and the future. For many households, medicine costs become an added burden at a time when every resource should be devoted to recovery. A compassionate health system must respond to the financial distress the disease causes.

Keeping this in mind, the Union government has rationalised trade margins for 137 identified non-scheduled anti-cancer drugs: The National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) capped the margins at 30% of the maximum retail price (MRP). The revised prices came into effect on November 9, 2026. The price a patient pays must reflect fair and reasonable distribution margins, not excessive mark-ups.

The results are already visible at the pharmacy counter. Over 80 pharmaceutical companies have notified revised MRPs for 1,366 products covering 121 of the 137 drugs. Prices have fallen for more than four out of every five of these products. For nearly half of them, the reduction is more than 50%; some even cost 96% less now. For a family paying for repeated cycles of chemotherapy, this makes a real difference to monthly treatment bills. Based on last year's consumption, patients and their families are expected to save about ₹3,500 crore every year, money that will stay in household budgets.



Jagat Prakash Nadda

In 2019, the NPPA undertook a pilot Trade Margin Rationalisation (TMR) exercise covering 42 non-scheduled anti-cancer drugs, which brought down MRPs by up to 90% across 526 brands. The current measure extends this approach to a broader list of 137 drugs, identified on the recommendation of an expert committee. The list will be updated periodically.

Affordability is necessary for equitable health care. A medicine available but unaffordable is of little use to a patient. The NPPA regulates the prices of medicines under the Drugs (Prices Control) Order (DPCO), 2013, issued under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955. While it fixes ceiling prices for essential drugs listed in the National List of Essential Medicines, it monitors the annual price increase of non-scheduled medicines. However, analysis of market data showed that the gap between the ex-factory price and the price paid by the consumer was high for some non-scheduled drugs, particularly cancer medicines. The Centre has acted to correct this anomaly by capping margins.

Effective implementation of the initiative is also a focus area so that the full benefit reaches the patient and the families. Manufacturers must ensure that the revised prices reach every pharmacy and hospital, and pharmacies and hospitals must display them transparently and comply fully. Patients and caregivers can check the revised prices on the NPPA website and the Pharma Sahi Daam app, and can report overcharging.

TMR is part of a larger health transformation of the past 12 years under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The government now approaches health as a foundation for dignity, productivity and social justice. Ayushman Bharat has eased access to hospital care for vulnerable families. Under the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD), over 500 day-care cancer centres have been set up to facilitate timely access to chemotherapy and other day-care oncology services. Ayushman Arogya Mandirs provide free screening for common cancers to citizens above 30 years of age, enabling early detection.

To strengthen tertiary care, the Tata Memorial Centre has established six hospitals at Varanasi, Visakhapatnam, New Chandigarh, Guwahati, Sangrur, and Muzaffarpur to provide comprehensive cancer care. Cancer treatment services, including diagnostic, medical and surgical facilities, have also been extended to all 22 new AIIMS.

The Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana ensures the availability of quality generic medicines at affordable prices. The Government has also set up AMRIT pharmacies to provide lifesaving and essential medicines at discounts ranging from 50-90%. To further ease treatment costs, 36 lifesaving drugs and medicines for cancer, rare diseases and chronic diseases have been fully exempted from Basic Customs Duty. The rationalisation of anti-cancer drug trade margins advances this broader commitment to affordable medicines.

TMR recognises that affordability and a healthy pharmaceutical industry must advance together. The cap applies to margins in the trade channel and leaves the manufacturer's selling price untouched. Legitimate manufacturer revenues are, therefore, protected, and with that, the capacity to keep investing in research, development and innovation. A nation's health care ecosystem is measured not only by advances in medical technology, but by whether its people can access them when they need them most. At its centre lie affordable, quality and accessible health services for every citizen. The TMR reaffirms a simple principle: No family should face avoidable financial hardship because of excessive margins on life-saving medicines.

*Jagat Prakash Nadda is Union minister for health and family welfare. The views expressed are personal*