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Health Minister urges States to strengthen food testing labs

Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare, JP Nadda has urged the States to come forward with the proposals or give the plan for strengthening the food testing laboratories. He said, “The Central Government is providing support of Rs. 482 crore to the States for strengthening the laboratories. As many as 45 State labs are to be strengthened. I request the States to come forward with the proposals or give the plan for strengthening the laboratories.”

The Union Minister was speaking at the Health Ministers Roundtable on Food Safety & Nutrition, organised by organised by Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in New Delhi today.

Nadda further said that finance will not be a constraint and each State should have at least one government food laboratory of high quality with bigger States having at least two. Citing the example of Pradhan Mantri Dialysis Program, the Health Minister said that initially states
expressed some apprehensions about this initiative, however, today the programme is a huge success. “More than 1.76 lakhs patients have availed free services from 539 Dialysis Units across the country,” he added.

Speaking on the enforcement of food standards, Nadda said that there should be fairness and transparency in enforcement. “We must safeguard public health by ensuring all food businesses are licensed and follow standards. At the same time, we should be careful that it does not put unnecessary regulatory burden on the food businesses”, Nadda said. Emphasising on generating awareness, Nadda said that sensitisation is a major area to work for and FSSAI can provide support in this so that people opt for self-regulation.

The Health Minister further mentioned that the focus should shift from disease and treatment centred healthcare to preventive and promotive healthcare. Moving towards this, the Government has announced transforming 1.5 lakh sub health centres to ‘Health and Wellness’ centres. Nadda further said that in a step towards provision of comprehensive primary care, the Government has initiated universal screening of common non-communicable disease (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension and common cancers at the sub-centre and primary health centre (PHCs). “This will enable the strengthening of preventive and promotive health, improve patient referral and access to secondary care services, Nadda added.

Speaking at the function, Ashwini Kumar Choubey, Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare said that promoting and building the mechanisms for availability and consumption of safe and nutritious food is central to attainment of the goals laid out in the National Health Policy 2017 which focuses on “promotive and preventive healthcare” and targets to reduce disease burden and premature mortality through non-communicable disease like diabetes, cardiovascular diseases among others. He further said that carrying out outreach efforts to create awareness in people about safe food & nutrition at schools and workplace is central to avoiding food borne disease related morbidity & mortality and consequent savings in healthcare.

Preeti Sudan, Secretary (Health) assured support to the States through National Health Mission (NHM). She further said that we all are aware of the rising incidence of non-communicable diseases in our country. Promoting healthy dietary habits amongst citizens is a key step to address it. “We must work together to inspire greater public confidence about food and nudge people to eat safe and eat right so that we can be a healthier nation”, she stated.

The Union Health Minister also released framework for ‘Clean Street Food Hubs’ and ‘Safe and Hygienic Food Festivals’. These two initiatives would help build capacities of street food vendors and will go a long way to inspire citizens’ trust in unorganised street food vending.

During the Roundtable, the State Health Ministers assured to work towards creating a culture of self-compliance amongst food businesses by helping them build internal capacities, focus on third party audit, making enforcement transparent, standardised, predictable and fair by adopting a digital compliance platform, encouraging rating and fair competition amongst food businesses. States agreed to strengthen the food safety machinery and the state food lab system in their respective states.