Crossing the line: On Delhi’s decision to limit health services

Delhi should not hide failures by limiting health-care access to just its residents

The decision announced by Chief Minister to restrict COVID-19 treatment in Delhi’s private hospitals and those run by the government of NCT only to those with proof of residence in the city was ill-thought-out.

- As Lieutenant-Governor Anil Baijal noted in his order overruling the decision, ‘Right to Health’ is an integral part of ‘Right to Life’ under Article 21 of the Constitution.
- While health care is far from being universal in India, positively denying that to someone on the grounds of residency is insensitive and irresponsible.
- The Lieutenant-Governor has now directed that treatment should not be denied to anyone.
- Mr. Kejriwal depicted a scenario of “people of the whole country” overwhelming hospitals in the city as justification for his nativism.
- After the LG’s intervention, the Chief Minister and his deputy, reiterated the argument and preemptively sought to wash their hands of the worsening situation.
- They expect 5.5 lakh COVID-19 cases by July-end for which 80,000 beds could be needed.
- The 10-week lockdown was meant to ramp up health infrastructure, and if the AAP government has not done that, it has only itself to blame. In fact, it must come clean on what it has done.

What to do?

- Restriction of movement is a crucial tool in pandemic management, but it has to be justifiable.
- The NCT is functionally contiguous with Gurugram in Haryana and NOIDA in Uttar Pradesh.
- Thousands cross these borders for work and other needs including health care. People contribute to tax revenues in three different jurisdictions.
- This makes Mr. Kejriwal’s rhetoric unreasonable as much as Karnataka’s decision to prevent residents of Kasargod in Kerala from accessing hospitals in Mangaluru earlier.
- The AAP government’s approach is contentious for more reasons, however, as it is using it also as a diversionary tactic.
- While the city is recording an exponential growth in infections, the government is trying to deflect attention from its inadequacies by hiding the numbers.
- It has reduced testing dramatically — on June 2 it was 6,070, on June 7, 5,042, and on June 8, 3,700.
- The AAP government accused private labs of flouting ICMR guidelines and discouraged testing of asymptomatic people. The high positivity rate — the proportion of positives to total tests — indicates that the NCT is not testing enough.

The ICMR’s May 18 strategy directed testing of direct and high risk contacts of confirmed coronavirus individuals even if asymptomatic. The government revised this by removing “asymptomatic” from the clause, which was also overturned by the LG who ordered that
Guidelines must be adhered to in their entirety. Delhi is testing more than the national average for per million population but that does not say much given that it has a population density 30 times the national figure. Delhi needs to get its act together.