



HOME REMEDY

In Search Of A Healthy Solution



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Neonatology or the care of the just-born is a highly specialised medical discipline practised by super specialist doctors in the midst of perfectly sterile wards and incubators. In fact, the World Health Organization's guidelines were unambiguous: Neonatal diseases are so complicated and delicate that ill infants should be rushed to hospital.

Dr Abhay and Rani Bang turned this notion on its head. They put neonatal care in the hands of trained village health workers amidst much hand-wringing over the dangers of doing this. The result was the plummeting of the infant mortality rate (IMR) in 39 villages of Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district, where the Bang model was implemented, from 121 in 1987 to 30 in 2003. At that time, Maharashtra's official IMR figure was 60. The Bangs call this reduction of dependence on hospitals Arogya Swaraj.

After completing their masters in public health from Johns Hopkins University, the Bangs chose to work in Gadchiroli, one of the poorest rural areas of Maharashtra. They set up a non-profit organisation called Search (Society for Education, Action and Research in Community Health) in 1985. "There was no way that hospitals or modern health care would be accessible to infants and mothers in those remote villages. So, we decided to bring healthcare to their doorstep." The solution was to empower rural midwives and new mothers with scientific knowledge. Community health workers are meticulously trained and go through regular checks to ensure their actions are by the book. If they are even slightly in doubt, they consult one of the doctors in the programme. "Case fatality is equal to or lower than in small and medium-size hospitals," says Dr Abhay Bang. There's been a 75% decline in pneumonia mortality among children, and 56% reduction in neonatal deaths. Around 80 village health workers and 120 midwives have learnt to diagnose and treat killers such as neonatal sepsis and infant pneumonia. Even illiterate village midwives can count a child's respiratory rate and diagnose pneumonia using a 'breath counter' improvised from an abacus by Dr Abhay Bang.

The Bangs' home-based neonatal care model has attracted global attention. Today, the Bangs' model of home-based newborn care is replicated across India, and in Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi and Madagascar.