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Post 7/11, city to get trauma care cells

Tie-ups with psychiatrists, BMC, TISS; first one to come up in 2 weeks

Sunanda Mehta

Mumbai, August 21: FOR 16 years, a proposal to set up permanent counselling cells to help disaster survivors in Mumbai has been gathering dust with the state government. Today, it's about to become a reality.

Mohan Agashe, former professor of psychiatry at BJ Medical College, Pune, was the man behind the original plan, and he is now ready to give it a final push after having been named advisor to the state government's mental health programme.

"Mumbai has always been a metropolis with problems different from that of any other city in the country. Now, the time has come to set up permanent counselling cells for disaster victims and this is the first job I am undertaking in my new capacity," Agashe said.

He is also clear that it has to be a public-private initiative between the government and private practioners and plans to set up these permanent cells as a part of the psychiatry wing at all government, civic and private hospitals.

As a short-term measure, the cells will come up in two weeks, while the entire project will be stabilised in three months.

Agashe is already on the job and has contacted leading psychiatrists in Mumbai—Vihang Vahiya, Harish Shetty, Bharat Shah and Nilesh Shah—and also held discussions with the **Tata Institute of Social Sciences.**

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“The modalities have been worked out and all the stakeholders including the government and private practitioners have agreed to chip in with funds and resources. It (psychological counselling) is a long-drawn affair. You cannot set up shop for two months and then close it down,” he said.

In fact, Latur, that was devastated by an earthquake measuring 6.3 on Richter Scale in 1993, has already acted upon the report that he submitted to the government in 1989 and set up cells to counsel disaster victims. But Mumbai, that has a high percentage of people with psychological distress levels, will be implementing it only now.

The need for Mumbai, which has the highest number of counsellors and psychiatrists in the state—600 and 230 respectively—to have permanent counselling cells is far more today.

“The distress levels make strong demands on people’s coping mechanism. That’s why we had terrorised people jumping out of running trains. This can be prevented with the counselling,” Agashe, who is also famous for his celluloid exploits, added.