

Not a single MRI scanner in Sri Lanka's public health sector

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The MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scanner, a modern piece of equipment used to help diagnose many medical conditions, is not available in any institute in the public health sector in Sri Lanka. Only the two main private hospitals in Colombo, Asiri and Nawaloka, have MRI scanners. Poor patients seeking treatment at government hospitals are forced to pay several thousand rupees to the private hospitals to get MRI tests. Many are forced to mortgage their properties in order to pay the fees.

National Hospital can only pay for three patients a week to go to the private hospitals for these tests, meaning that many must go without them. For patients suffering from neurological and neurosurgical problems the fee for the test can run Rs. 7500 to 15,000, well above the monthly income of even a white-collar worker in Sri Lanka.

Unlike the CT (computerised axial tomography) scanner, the MRI scanner does not expose the patient to radiation. The MRI scanner can also image cells, tissues or organs in three-dimensional form, making the diagnosis of illnesses easier and more accurate.

The availability of CT scan tests is also very limited for poor patients in Sri Lanka. Consultant Neurophysician Dr. Jagath Wijesekera, in his address on being inducted as president of the Ceylon College of Physicians, pointed out: "Even at the National Hospital, which is the final referral centre for medical care in Sri Lanka, investigation facilities are not freely available to the physician. For example, at the institute of Neurology the limited number of CT scan facilities have made it necessary for the consultant neurologists to actually decide which patients need CT scan investigation most, and sometimes the patients who actually require CT scans cannot be scanned due to the limited quota available for the physician."

The Peoples' Alliance government is in the process of transforming free health services in the country into a profit making business. It has decided not to buy an MRI scanner for the public sector with government funds, which would cost approximately Rs. 60 million (US\$1 million). This is only a fraction of the annual cost of financing the racist war against the Tamil people in the North and East of the country. For the year 1999 alone, the war budget allocation is Rs. 5,700 million.

Dr. Colvin Samarasinghe, a senior consultant neurosurgeon at the National Hospital, has set up the public Department of Neurosurgery Trust Fund to help raise money to purchase an MRI scanner. Now Sri Lankan cricket captain Arjuna Ranatunga has also joined the campaign, issuing a cap with his signature selling for 250 rupees each. But such charitable campaigns can do little to remedy a situation where the government is intent on abandoning the free healthcare service, and encouraging the growth of private medical facilities.



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