

# Sri Lankan health workers and patients' relatives denounce public hospital crisis

Our reporters  
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Popular anger and frustration are rising over the Sri Lankan government's failure to provide adequate funding for life-saving medicines, essential medical equipment and laboratory facilities in the public hospitals and related health institutions.

Patients are being forced to buy medicine and access services from private pharmacies and laboratories at exorbitant prices. Those who cannot afford these expenses face life-threatening risks.

Health Minister Nalinda Jayatissa has attempted to deflect the rising mass anger by blaming previous governments for failing to place timely orders for basic medical supplies. While this may be partly true, it is not the main cause of the worsening health crisis.

During last year's elections, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) promised to improve the health service if elected. In line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands, the JVP/NPP government has reduced annual health expenditure to 383 billion rupees (\$US1.27 billion) this year, down from 410 billion rupees in 2024.

Sri Lankan hospitals face aging equipment, collapsing infrastructure, drug shortages and severe understaffing. Over 180 essential medicines are out of stock, vital tests face year-long delays, and life-saving devices are scarce. Nurses and doctors struggle with overwhelming workloads and increased exposure to diseases that the government is accused of downplaying.

Attempting to deflect mounting public anger, the parliament's Sectoral Oversight Committee on Health, Media and Women's Empowerment met with health ministry officials on July 23 to review the situation. While health officials "assured" the committee that there would be no medicine shortages from 2026, neither they nor any government representative explained how patients are supposed to survive the next five months.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters recently spoke about

the dire situation with medical staff and the relatives of patients at several key hospitals.

**Lakshmi's** husband has been receiving inpatient treatment for the past five months at Apeksha Hospital in Colombo, the country's only dedicated cancer hospital. The couple are from Bandarawela, about 200 km away.

She said the family had been forced to spend a significant amount of money for treatment over the past two months due to the lack of medicines and testing equipment at the facility. This includes 140,000 rupees (about \$470) for a medicine called ARA-C.

"Some tests are not done here. Bone marrow tests are carried out through an Indian company. A single test costs about 40,000 rupees (\$134). I've already paid for two tests," Lakshmi said, explaining that she had to sell her jewellery to cover these expenses.

The government has failed to intervene and resolve basic problems facing patients, she said. Even necessities, such as hot water, must be purchased.

**Chamila** from Matale in the Central Province, about 150 km from Colombo, brings her daughter to Apeksha Hospital for cancer treatment.

"We receive medicines from the hospital but must spend around 50,000 rupees (\$168) per trip to bring our child here and take her home. It's a huge, unbearable amount. I've been forced to take out 200,000 rupees in loans," she said.

The hospital lacks an MRI machine, which means samples must be sent to Colombo National Hospital. If the state hospitals are privatised or made to pay levies to private institutions, then people could be left to die without any treatment. Some paying wards have already been introduced at Apeksha Hospital.

**A private hospital aide** told the WSWs that expensive chemotherapy drugs are unavailable in the hospitals but are sold outside for hundreds of thousands of rupees and well beyond patients' reach. He added that hospital

equipment is severely dilapidated with radiotherapy machines breaking down weekly due to maintenance funding cuts.

**Sumitra**, who is seeking treatment for her sibling, recounted how broken radiotherapy machines had delayed necessary care. She recalled that her brother had died two years ago under similar circumstances because he had not been given the required radiotherapy treatment. She said poor people feel utterly helpless because private care was so costly and remained inaccessible. Sumitra criticised the government, adding that pensioners' savings were even being subjected to unfair taxes.

“How many lies were told so they could get into government? Now people are angry. They said they would spend sparingly and not use official government vehicles but all these [the election promises] are abandoned. Rice and coconut prices have skyrocketed. Ordinary people cannot survive these attacks,” she said.

**A doctor from Badulla Hospital** said, “The lack of medicines and staff has worsened since this government came to power.”

Badulla Hospital is in Uva Province, about 230 kilometres east of Colombo, where some of the poorest sections of the island's population live. The doctor explained that although poor estate-worker mothers suffer from rheumatoid conditions, the hospital lacks adequate medicine.

Because these women cannot afford to buy medicine from private pharmacies, they often give birth to underweight children. She denounced the JVP/NPP government, calling the health minister's claim that the highest budget allocation was made for health as a “lie.”

**A nursing officer** with 10 years' experience from Jaffna Teaching Hospital in the war-ravaged Northern and Eastern provinces where health services are among the worst in the country, explained, “We are heavily understaffed, which is the main issue.”

“Wards are always overcrowded. My ward currently has 47 patients, but its capacity is just 30 beds. This is the usual situation in every ward and so extra patients must sleep on the floor. We have just three nurses to care for them. If one takes leave, only two remain. Sometimes I have worked alone in one ward,” she said.

The overworked nurse explained that proper care is impossible under these conditions. Some patients, especially those needing special attention, are treated as burdens. Safe treatment requires fewer patients per nurse. Rushed care leads to deadly mistakes, she said. One patient had swallowed a medicine meant for vaginal use

because no one properly explained the instructions.

Overcrowded wards lack basic staff facilities, forcing nurses to rest on makeshift beds. There were no proper lunchrooms or washrooms, she added.

The nurse blamed hospital administrators for overworking existing staff instead of hiring more. Patients' free daily meals were being rationed because of drastic budget cuts. Nurses were also instructed not to register patients from Jaffna town and nearby areas. Many patients, she continued, have no visitors—high bus fares and daily-wage jobs keep families away—and so don't get adequate food or clean clothes.

The nurse explained that there was no proper program to improve nurses' skills.

“The government does not support higher education. What will happen to the service if no one pursues further studies?” she asked. She spent a large sum of money to complete her BSc in nursing but could not take academic leave to pursue a master's degree due to staff shortages.

Earning around 60,000 rupees, her salary barely covers living expenses, even with overtime. She pays for board and uniforms (about 10,000 rupees) out of her own pocket. To survive, nurses are forced to work long hours and must sacrifice their family life because there is no alternative, she said.

In March, nurses and other health workers protested the Dissanayake government's cuts to overtime, allowances, promotions and wages. The United National Party-aligned Government Nursing Officers Union stalled the action, following empty promises from the health minister. Other unions falsely praised the austerity budget as “pro-worker.” Sri Lankan union leaders continue to cling to President Dissanayake's bogus promise of a staggered salary increase over three years.



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