

# Pvt docs fleecing the poor

**M**Y MAID S's expression was tense. "Look at these" she said, thrusting a sheaf of papers at me. "I have a serious condition." Bracing myself for the worst, I opened the report. S had been diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), and handed an elaborate medical prescription, consisting mostly of expensive vitamin formulations. "The doctor says I must get another ultrasound in two weeks," she declared.

I was stumped. How had S got the impression that polycystic ovary syndrome was a serious disease? The reality is that this is a common endocrine disorder. "Polycystic ovary syndrome is primarily a lifestyle disorder, created by an imbalanced diet and physical inactivity, which is conducive to the development of hormone imbalance and insulin resistance," says Dr Anoop Misra, chairman, Fortis C-DOC Hospital. "This condition can be reversed by weight loss, diet, exercise, and medication."

Now if S had been trying to get



pregnant, I could understand her worry - PCOS can impact fertility adversely. But she already had a son, and didn't plan to extend her family. So what was all the fuss about? S provided the answer soon enough. "I went to a fantastic doctor *didi*, a private lady doctor in Malviya Nagar."

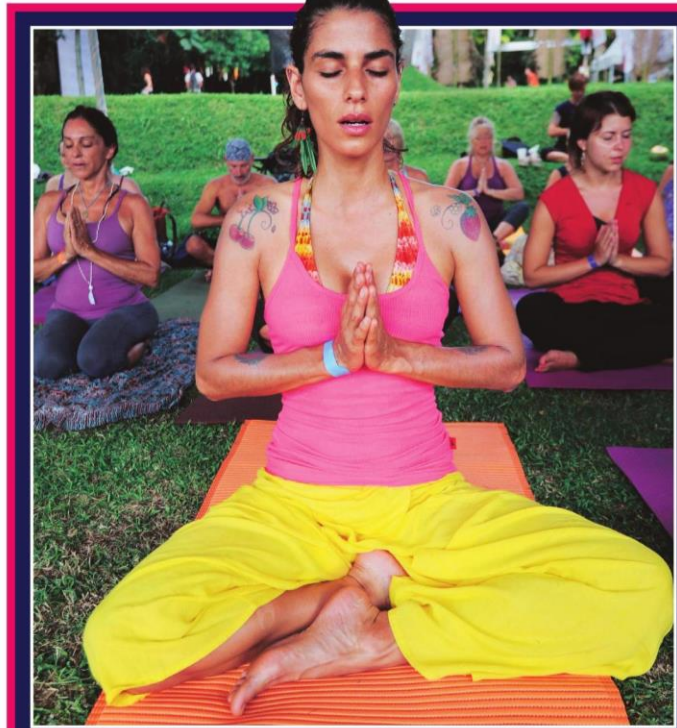
**Drivers, cooks, ayahs and sweepers are told to have expensive tests for minor ailments**

Like many others who can ill-afford private health care, S believes that private doctors are Gods. Going to a charitable clinic is below her dignity, as is standing with throngs of people at a public health facility. Instead, she heads off to a private medic recommended by some relative or friend every time she is ill. And most of the doctors she consults ignore the fact that she can ill-afford their fees, or prescriptions.

In this situation, for instance, the doctor who diagnosed PCOS didn't give S the advice that cost nothing: To lose weight and bring down her insulin resistance. A second ultrasound exam just two weeks after the first one wasn't necessary either. "Usually the ultrasound exam is repeated in 6 months or an year," says Dr Misra.

S, however, is pleased with the doctor's diagnosis. She goes around with a long suffering expression. Her disease has given her an excuse to spend the afternoon sleeping and let her mother in law care for her child.

But I can't help bursting her bubble. I tell her that many women have polycystic ovaries, and that she must cut down the



## MEDITATION IS THE NEW MEDICINE

MEDITATION is likely to take over from medication in the treatment of attention deficit disorder, say experts. While drugs have been the first line of treatment for this problem so far, evidence that mindfulness training can impact the brain in a more effective is mounting. A large number of children and adults suffer from short attention span. The practice of mindfulness training for sustaining attention could be a healthy solution.

amount of rice and sugar she eats to kick the problem. S doesn't respond well- she thinks I'm trying to diminish the gravity of her situation. The private doctor's advice (naturally) carries more weight than mine.

S's story is that of hundreds of domestics who flock to private clinics each time they have an illness. Neighbourhood doctors make a fortune out of drivers, cooks, ayahs and sweepers: They turn a blind eye to the circumstances of their patients and have no qualms about charging them an exorbitant fee.

My aunt once recounted an occasion when the maid B and her 5 year old son were walking

to the market and happened to meet the local doctor enroute. B casually asked him if he thought that the slight redness in her son's eye was a cause for concern.

**T**HE doctor gazed at the boy's eye for a second and recommended some drops. B thanked him and started walking away. "That will be five hundred rupees," said the doctor. B paid up and came home empty handed- she hadn't done the household shopping since the money had been spent on the doctor instead.

This is a grossly unjust scenario, and we need to hold private medical practitioners accountable for this kind of violation. Local doctors can certainly establish a sliding scale of payment to accommodate the healthcare needs of poorer patients, and cut back on recommendations for needless tests and fancy vitamin formulations.

The current "parallel" system of healthcare for underprivileged people - free dispensaries at local Gurudwaras or Arya Samaj mandirs - can't solve the healthcare problems of everyone in need. Nor does it absolve private doctors from the responsibility of helping the sick and needy.

### BOOZE KILLS MORE THAN AIDS DOES



DESPITE attempts to curb drinking, liquor consumption in India has risen over the past decade: 32 percent men and 10.6 percent of women above the age of 15 are drinkers, says a new report by the WHO. And binge drinking, considered the most dangerous kind of drinking, is on the rise too. Deaths due to alcohol consumption are higher than those caused by HIV and violence.