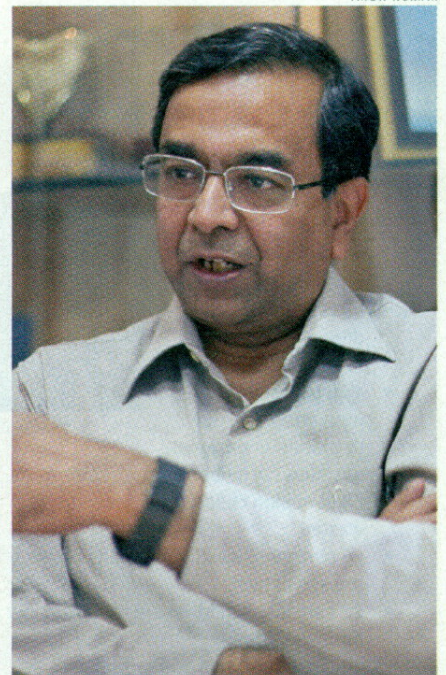


INTERVIEW

*Prof K Srinath Reddy, head of the PM's health panel and chairman of the planning commission's high-level expert group on universal health coverage*

## “Private players should be engaged in responsible manner”



ARUN KUMAR

**P**rofessor K Srinath Reddy, a renowned health expert, took up a challenge to defend the Lancet's recommendations. He spoke with **Trithesh Nandan** on what needs to be done to tackle this menace. Edited excerpts:

### **What is the salient point of the 2013 Lancet report on maternal and child malnutrition?**

The reason why the Lancet brought out this edition at this point of time is not because the facts about malnutrition are not known to the world, but in the context of millennium development goals (MDGs), which would be reviewed in terms of progress in September 2013 during the United Nations annual general conference. The study wanted to remind the world that the targets of maternal and child nutrition have not been met and shouldn't be neglected.

### **How much will the report benefit India?**

As far as India is concerned, the infant mortality rate and child mortality rate are coming down. The unfortunate part is that undernutrition has not really come down in a substantive manner.

### **Do you think that the PM's national council on nutrition is capable enough to tackle the problem of malnutrition?**

The council headed by the PM is a good thing that sends a signal that the problem is taken seriously. However, it would be very unrealistic to expect the prime minister himself to devote adequate attention to it. The PM's council should be assisted by a technical advisory group which draws upon people from different sectors and prepare ground for action by evaluating the evidence and what is the best possible ways of achieving impact and translating that into policy recommendations. There should be a group of different stakeholders that looks after implementation. Another group should be for operations. It should consist of people from the government, civil society and relevant private sector groups, and look after how to operationalise. The policy recommendations made by the technical advisory group should go to the PM's council and then, once approved, move to the operations group. They should keep on managing the delivery. The technical groups should also work with evaluation, the online evaluation. Periodically, the result should be reported back to the council.

### **Don't you think the private sector's aim will be corporate profit maximisation, which will not solve the problem?**

Because of the history of some of those baby food companies' aggressive campaigns such as Nestle exclusive breastfeeding, the objective will be defeated. Now they have backtracked. It took a huge public campaign that made them backtrack and put the policy in place.

The Lancet has said that private players should be engaged in a responsible manner. They have also made caution about some of the harmful products. The private sector which comes on board should be carefully regulated.

### **By saying the private sector has a role to play, their role has been left open to interpretation. Your comments?**

We must make sure that we want these kinds of products and then there are these kinds of products we don't want private players to produce. And these are the products that shouldn't be advertised by private players. In a situation where national foods are increasingly going to be promoted, there are certain foods that the private sector can produce. You can consider that. ■