

BMC hopes to have ₹2,764-cr Covid bill reimbursed by govt

Mumbai: In the nearly two years since the pandemic hit the city, the effects, both financial and societal, have been tremendous. In Mumbai, more than 16,600 people have died of Covid while more than a million have tested positive since March 2020.

In the budget, the civic body has estimated a bill of Rs 2,764 crore on fighting Covid-19 and sought a reimbursement from the state for all expenses incurred. If Maharashtra was the worst hit within India, Mumbai was the second-worst hit urban centre in the state, Pune being at the top with highest deaths. Experts largely give BMC's handling of its biggest healthcare challenge a thumbs up, but some also point out lacunas that should be avoided in future.

According to public health researcher Ravi Duggal, Mumbai did fairly well in terms of maintaining transparency in reporting deaths and overall management of the crisis, and hence came to be appreciated by the Supreme Court too. "Mumbai Municipal Corporation has done some remarkable work and we may see what was done by BMC," were the words of the Supreme Court. "The fact that the corporation spent crores says that it stood up and responded to the crisis," said Duggal, adding that more than Rs 345 crore was spent in creating the jumbos that saved many lives. "However, in the fire-fighting, the non-Covid services and routine immunisation were hit and that shows a weak primary health system," he said.

Recalling the early phase of the pandemic, former KEM dean Dr Avinash Supe, who is also director at Hinduja Hospital, Khar, said Mumbai was the first to be hit and its initial response was chaotic. "But it managed to gather itself soon after," he said. A more prompt response during the first wave could have saved lives as a megacity like Mumbai shouldn't have experienced a crisis in ICU management and drug availability as it did. "It is good that the current budget is spending money on hospitals in the suburbs and better telemedicine linkages," he said.

Physician, Dr. Gautam Bhansali said the biggest takeaway from the pandemic should be the public-private partnership seen in Mumbai. Milind Mhaske of NGO Praja Foundation concurred saying that BMC was "agile" in handling Covid. "It's biggest plus was that it was willing to collaborate with multiple sectors, learn from them and listen to them. We should continue it post pandemic," he added. Suresh Kakani, additional municipal commissioner, said the civic body learnt to fight the pandemic better with every wave. The death rate, therefore, dropped from 3% in the first wave to less than 1% in the second and third waves.

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