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### A DOCTOR AND AN ACTIVIST

Not only is Dr Ramakanta Panda considered the safest hands in heart surgery, but if he has his way, costs of tests and investigations will benefit the patients in a huge way

**K**nown as the 'safest hands' for heart surgery, Dr Ramakanta Panda has been a surgeon trusted to perform high-risk surgeries. Coming from a village in Odisha, Dr Panda dreamt of being a cardiac doctor since his high school. According to him, the inspiration to be a heart surgeon came after reading about the first heart transplant in 1968 while he was in high school and LIFE magazine's feature on Dr Denton A. Cooley, who had done the first heart transplant in the US. The inspiration egged him on to perform an astounding number of cardiac procedures 24,000, of which 4,000 have been highly complex procedures.

He started his career almost 30 years ago. At the time, commenting on the paucity of heart surgeons he said, "While many patients would die due to heart problems, there were only handful of doctors who would perform heart surgery in four to five centres. It was considered the most complex and difficult surgery. Only the best opted to be a heart surgeon or a cardiologist."

While Dr Panda is trained in cardiac surgery from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, he completed his fellowship training at Cleveland Clinic, USA, under Dr Floyd Loop - pioneer of bypass surgery. Observing the huge gap in the medical care system especially in the heart surgeries and



back when I completed my MBBS, hardly 2-3 per cent people used to indulge in cut practice' but today that has raised to 70-80 per cent. It has become an unhealthy atmosphere because everybody suffers, which mainly includes poor patients as they get exposed to unnecessary treatment and investigations, as well as doctors who are forced to pay money to get patients.

"In the last two decades, the 'cut practice' percentage has increased due to which we decided it was time to take a stand now, otherwise in a few years, the system will increase to 100 per cent," he adds. "A new doctor starting his practice will find impossible to do so without paying money to get a patient. It is the most unethical working system, which needs to be stopped."

"Unfortunately, heart care is very expensive, but if we look at worldwide heart care and its cost, India is the cheapest heart care provider in the world. But, because of our standard of living, 80 - 90 per cent citizens can't afford it. For better improvement, the government should provide universal health insurance, especially for the underprivileged. There are a few schemes in the country that cover this cost for below poverty line citizens, but even then there are people who find it expensive. Those who can, should cover themselves with health insurance. The scheme should also cover lower-middle class population," Dr Panda added.

**IN THE OPERATING THEATRE, I ALWAYS THINK OF IT AS MY FIRST SURGERY**

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