

Sion hosp opens stem cell centre

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: Ravindra Ahire, a farm labourer's son from Malegaon, is happy he can hobble across the road with his walker. "I can manage half a kilometre," he said with glee. Fifteen months ago when TOI met him at Sion Hospital's neurosurgery ward, he was immobile after a bike accident.

Ahire owes his recovery from paraplegia to stem cell therapy. "He can walk a bit, he has sensation in his legs and bladder," said neurosurgeon Dr Alok Sharma and neuropathologist Dr Prerna Badhe who treated him.

Ahire was the first patient to get an infusion of stem cells — drawn from his own bone marrow — for spinal injuries in Sion Hospital. On Tuesday, the team that treated Ahire and seven others thereafter became the first in the city's public health network to boast of a stem cell centre. As it is a public hospital, patients needing the therapy will get free treatment.

"This is a big achievement for civic healthcare. We also have a new neurosurgery centre that will offer minimally invasive operations. One would expect this in the private sector but we are offering it to our patients," said Kishore Gajbhiye, additional municipal commissioner, at the inauguration ceremony on Tuesday by mayor Shubha Raul.

"Stem cell therapy is part of a new branch called regenerative medicine in which healthy cells are used to replace damaged cells," said Dr Sharma. Indeed, after their discovery in the late '90s, stem cells emerged as a hope for millions. "Initially, there seemed to be more hype than results," stated Dr Sharma. But he feels the results are now showing, especially in countries such as China, Korea, Portugal, Germany, Australia and India.

For now, the Sion Hospital centre will focus solely on spinal cord injuries (over 0.25 million sufferers). "Seven of our eight patients (22-54 age group) had suffered spinal injuries in accidents that had occurred two weeks to eight years before the treatment. The eighth patient had TB of the spine," said Dr Badhe.

Dr Sharma said that over half of the patients had done "exceptionally well". "Patients expect miracles from stem cells and are often disappointed that they cannot get back to normal. It must be understood that in spinal injuries, even small development such as restoration of sensation in legs is big," said Dr Sharma.

The Sion centre uses stem cells obtained from the patients themselves (instead of embryonic or cord blood cells). "Embryonic cells have ethical issues as well as the threat of cancer. Cord blood cells are expensive to process. Stem cells from the patient's bone marrow is simple to process and without side-effects," he said.

The centre already has 200 patients on its waiting list, with requests from Pakistan and the UK. "We can only handle two patients a day," said Dr Badhe. The procedure is long: stem cells are extracted from the patient's marrow, analysed and processed before being injected back into the site of the injury, the surroundings as well as the cerebrospinal fluid. "All this takes five hours," said Dr Badhe.

FIRST IN CITY

Stem cells are the body's master cells with the power to transform into any cell (say heart or nerve cells, for instance)

Sion Hospital is the first public hospital in Mumbai to offer stem cell therapy. AIIMS in New Delhi offers stem cell therapy for heart patients. Over half a dozen private entities offer it as well

At present, Sion will concentrate on spinal injury patients

It uses autologous stem cells (drawn from patients themselves) for treatment

It will take up brain stroke patients in future



NOTHING SHORT OF A MIRACLE: A file photo of Ravindra Ahire being examined by Dr Alok Sharma