

**hindustantimes**

■ Monday, January 21, 2013

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Mumbai, December 08, 2009

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First Published: 01:18 IST(8/12/2009)

Last Updated: 01:32 IST(8/12/2009)

# Stem cell therapy in city raises hopes

A smile spreads across Margaret Advani's face as she gingerly walks up three steps of a Chembur building on Thursday, supported by a crutch and husband Venu's arm. "I had been waiting for this day for six years," said the 60-year-old Karachi resident, who had been paralysed neck-down after a fall severed a part of her spinal cord.

Physiotherapy and treatment at a rehabilitation centre in Toronto had failed to improve her condition. Venu brought Margaret to NeuroGen Brain and Spine Institute in Mumbai for stem cell therapy as a last resort. Stem cells extracted from Advani's hip bone marrow were injected into her spinal fluid three weeks ago at the Chembur centre.

The couple knew they had made the right decision when

Margaret felt the doctor's hand on her arm a day after the procedure. "I had had no sensation in that arm for years," she said.

Margaret is among a growing number of people opting for stem cell therapy for incurable conditions like spinal cord injury and multiple sclerosis.

The wait-list of over 200 patients at the civic-run Sion Hospital, which offers the expensive treatment for free, includes names from the US and the UK. This, perhaps, indicates India's growing expertise in the field.

"We are getting 15 to 20 enquiries every month now compared to around 10 when we started in October 2008," said Dr Alok Sharma, who heads the Sion Hospital centre.

Despite lack of comprehensive studies on the efficacy of the treatment, people are queuing up. Advani plans to return to Mumbai in February for a second shot of stem cells. "Next time, I will come on my own feet, not in a wheelchair," she said.

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