

# Stem cells offer hope to 26/11 victim, activist

**Malathy Iyer | TNN**

Mumbai: They are stars of sorts in the Sion Hospital's neurosurgery ward.

Shabira Khan, who has literally been in constant pain since he was injured on the night of 26/11 when Pakistani terrorist Ajmal Kasab and his associates unleashed terror on the city, and selfproclaimed RTI activist Arun Sawant, who dodged two bullets before the third pierced his spinal cord in another incident and paralysed him, have been stared at ever since their hospitalisation there.

Both have undergone stem cell therapy to help repair their damaged nervous system. While Shabira seeks permanent relief from a crippling pain in her left leg, Sawant has become the first bullet-injury victim to get stem cells immediately after being shot at.

"I have faith this therapy will work," said Dockyard Road resident Khan on Thursday. She sustained grievous injuries while crossing the road when a bomb in a taxi exploded on 26/11. She was in and out of hospitals for 13 months before resigning herself to crutches. "All my compensation money has been spent on medication. Thankfully treatment is free in Sion Hospital."

Dr Alok Sharma, head of neurosurgery at the hospital who has been offering the stem cell therapy for two years, said, "Shrapnels from the bomb penetrated her left leg and injured the nerves, robbing her of the ability to walk. Now, she feels stem cells are her last hope."

In Sawant's case, a political vendetta led to a sniper attack on a dusty road in Badlapur in February this year. Sharma said, "He was shot at from behind and a bullet went straight through the spinal cord and adjacent nerves before being embedded in the spine's frontal curve." Sawant said the local hospital where he was first admitted to refused to remove the bullet, "but the Sion team not only removed it but also offered stem cells". He also needed eight titanium screws and two rods to repair his spine.

According to Sharma, Sawant is perhaps the first bullet-injury patient to receive stem cells in an acute setting. "Stem cells have been used for patients with old bullet injuries," said Sharma, adding that Sawant's case would benefit soldiers who sustained bullet injuries in the spine. "We must emphasise that stem cell therapy is not a cure but rather an attempt to produce functional improvement in the patient's ability to do everyday activities."

Said Sawant, "When I was shot at in February this year, I had no sensation in either of my legs. But after the treatment, I have got full sensation back in the left leg and half in right." Sion Hospital is the only public hospital in Mumbai that provides stem cell therapy to patients with neurological conditions like muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis and stroke. "We use adult stem cells from the patient's bone marrow. These have less risk of rejection and side-

effects as compared to umbilical cord and embryonic stem cells,” Sharma said.



**RAY OF HOPE:** Shabira Khan from Dockyard Road had lost her ability to walk after she was injured on 26/11