

TIMES BUSINESS

Oral drug for thalassaemia

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New Delhi: Now a more convenient and patient-friendly treatment will be available for thalassaemia, a genetic blood disorder in children. In a major breakthrough, companies are now offering oral medicines as against painful injectables to manage the deadly disease, which affects nearly 4% of the country's population. Thalassaemia is a genetic disorder characterized by the inability to produce normal haemoglobin.

Thalassaemic children are highly anaemic and require regular blood transfusions in order to survive. Although blood transfusions extend life, they are associated with excess iron deposits in vital organs such as heart, liver and pancreas. About 50% of thalassaemics die because of cardiac complications. Thus, it is necessary to give drugs that will remove iron (iron chelators) to these patients.

Companies such as Novartis and Cipla will soon be introducing a once-daily oral iron chelator (Deferasirox), available as dispersible tablets, in the country.

Says Dr Bagai, director and head of Pediatrics, Rockland Hospital, "Between two to five years of age, blood

transfusion starts. At the same time, iron chelation therapy is advised, either orally or through an injection or a digital infusion pump. For kids, oral medication works the best. Over the last 10-15 years, bone marrow transplant is also being done, especially overseas."

Every year approximately 100,000 children with thalassaemia are born worldwide, of which 10,000 are born in India, with the figure going as high as 5%-10% in certain communities. Ethnic groups such as Sindhis, Gujaratis, Punjabis, Jains, Marwadis are considered high-risk communities for this disease.

Says Amar Lulla, JMD, Cipla, "Prior to 1995, the only available treatment was an injectable drug called desferrioxamine that was administered by slow overnight infusions using a pump. Treatment was expensive and cumbersome, and led to significant non-compliance. In 1995, Cipla brought in a revolution in oral iron chelation therapy with the introduction of Kelfer (deferiprone) - the world's first oral iron chelator."

The treatment of thalassaemia, including blood transfusion and iron chelation may cost from Rs 50,000-2 lakh per annum.