



TMC's pediatric oncology unit receives 2,000 new patients annually. Centres like St Jude India offer free accommodation to underprivileged kids



Dr Rajiv Sarin, director, ACTREC says they fight for each patient's life



Respective of the category of the patient — general, or private — the treatment is the same, says Dr Anil D'Cruz, director, TMC

Treat, control, conquer

Tata Memorial Centre brings together top researchers and docs to offer the best in cancer care, often for free

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In February 2010, when 17-year-old Saahas Mehra was told he had Philadelphia chromosome positive Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL), his reaction was, 'Okay, now what?' His mother, 48-year-old homemaker Alka Mehra, however, was worried. She realised that their middle-class income wasn't enough to cover the cost of the operation — Rs 51 lakh. In December, Saahas underwent a bone marrow transplant at Advanced Centre for Treatment and Research in Cancer (ACTREC), the research and development arm of the Tata Memorial Centre (TMC) after receiving donations from newspaper appeals, a school collection drive and the Ratan Tata Trust, among others. His doctor, Navin Khattry co-helms the Bone Marrow Treatment Programme, a 17-bed facility where over 300 transplants have been conducted since November 2007, when this super-specialised unit shifted from Parel to Navi Mumbai. The patients being treated at ACTREC — which also has a genome mapping and animal cancer centre — stay in a hostel in the green 60-acre campus.

Commissioned in 1941, the TMC is one of the most well-regarded cancer treatment centres in India. The mandate of this Department of Atomic Energy-funded autonomous body — to offer the best in cancer care — has ensured two things, says Dr Khattry. One, patients are cared for holistically,

and two, doctors focus on specific functions. His, for instance, is to perform transplants for acute leukemias and lymphomas.

Dr Rajiv Sarin, director, ACTREC points out that while a small team may not be able to take on too many patients, it does "fight for each patient's life." "The patient is top priority for us."

For Dr Anil D'Cruz, director, Tata Memorial Hospital, the other arm of TMC located in Parel, this attention to a patient's needs has ensured a multidisciplinary approach to cancer care. Disease management groups that comprise a medical oncologist (who administers systemic therapies like chemotherapy, targeted therapies, as well as other Biological Response Modifiers), a radiation oncologist, an onco-surgeon and other specialists depending on the type of cancer, treat patients. A head and neck cancer patient, for instance, may even have a speech therapist and a dentist on this tumour board.

Dr D'Cruz also argues that both, general and private category of patients receive similar treatment. The TMH has a 60/40 ratio — the children's oncology department has a 70/30 — of patients who receive financial aid to those who pay for treatment. The hospital's social workers department puts families in touch with NGOs

that offer aid. They also put outstation patients like 14-year-old Rahul Kumar from Madhubani district of Bihar in touch with institutions, such as St Jude India Childcare Centre for accommodation. Rahul visited TMH last April for leukemia treatment accompanied by his father, 40-year-old farmer Niranjan Saha. The duo had to spend a few nights on the pavement outside the hospital before they found accommodation.

The pediatric oncology unit receives 2,000 cases annually. Dr Shripad Banavali, head of the department of medical and pediatric oncology points out that with limited beds available, 90 per cent of the cases are treated as outpatients. "We've developed holistic care for the kids and no child with curable cancer is sent back for lack of funds or logistic reasons," he says.

Usha Banerji, CEO of St Jude India, admits that accommodation is an issue. With centres in Parel, Lower Parel and Kharghar, it houses 79 children in the city. Luckily, the TMH has expansion plans. The 12th Five Year Plan aims to open two centres in Chandigarh and Vishakhapatnam (each at a cost of Rs 450 crore). The government has also lent a five-acre plot in Parel to open a women and children's wing, and a Hadron Beam centre that offers targeted radiation with decreased side effects, meant especially for pediatric cancers. And, if all goes according to plan, Rs 12 crore will be set aside for Bone Marrow Transplant patients like Saahas, and children below 10 years.

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