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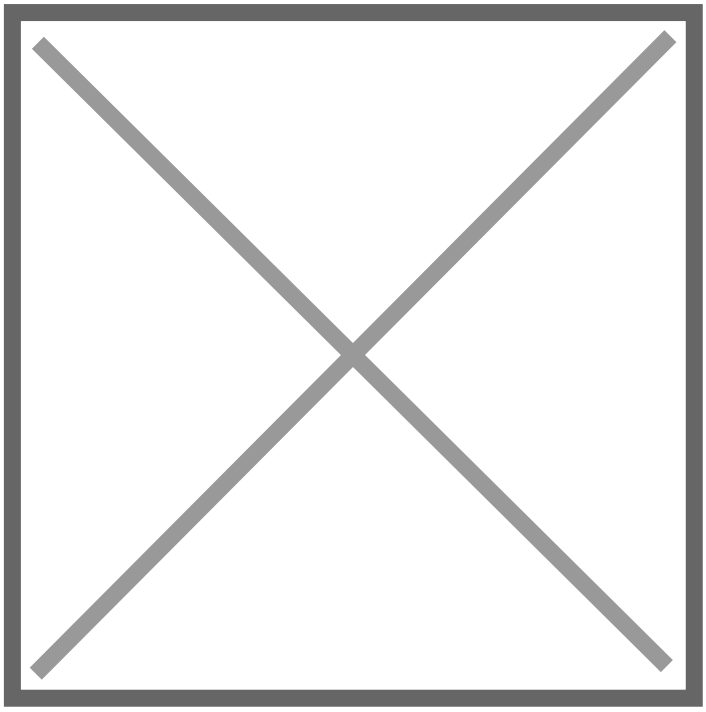
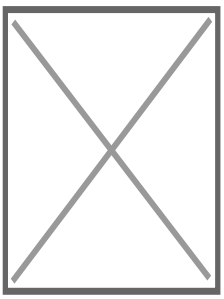


A case for Hepatitis B vaccine



India's booming software exports are dramatically increasing the competitiveness of the world's leading companies and organization. The highly-export oriented industry finds few takers for its skills within the country and hence the Indian economy is under achieving its potential, despite the 8 percent annual growth.

India's globally acclaimed vaccine manufacturers are in a situation similar to the software exporters. Take the case of Hepatitis B vaccine which can prevent the life-threatening infection at a fraction of the overall treatment costs if one gets that disease. Five Indian companies, Serum Institute, Bharat Biotech, Shantha Biotech, Biological E and Panacea Biotec, are among the world's most coveted suppliers of this vaccine. Their products are part of the Universal Immunization Programme in more than half the countries in the world.
Together they have capacity to produce about 250 million doses of this vaccine every year. When Hepatitis B was introduced in the country's national immunization program on a pilot basis in 2002, the costs were high. Hence the government hesitated and there has been just about 7 million doses from these companies to vaccinate 2.3 million children every year. The prices of Hepatitis B vaccine has crashed so much due to high capacity build-up that it is sold at a throwaway price. So the government could easily include Hepatitis B vaccine to vaccinate all the 22 million children born in India every year.

As a report in this issue, BioSpectrum points, the government and experts are unnecessarily worried about the cost of a basic vaccine like Hepatitis B at the cost of neglecting long-term adverse health conditions. Every new born child could get a shot of Hepatitis B along with other primary vaccines for less than Rs 100 crore annually. Indian companies can easily supply the entire Hepatitis B requirement and still meet their global commitments. Currently, only 2.8 percent of the Hepatitis B manufactured in the country is used within the national borders. While the whole world benefits from the Indian expertise, our own children are denied the benefits of this vaccine.

Shantha Biotechnics pioneered the Hepatitis B manufacturing in the country and its founder Varaprasad Reddy has been crusading for providing the benefits of this wonderful vaccine to Indian children for nearly a decade. Bharat Biotech's Krishna Ella has repeatedly stressed the need to set up a National Vaccine Commission to formulate policies and ensure that India's young citizens reap the benefits of indigenous vaccines. Serum Institute's Cyrus Poonawalla has poured his heart out at many public functions about the callous attitude of Indian health establishment in neglecting the primary health of our nation's future citizens for want of imagination and compassion.

It is not too late even at this stage. Under a World Health Organization (WHO) guideline, more than 150 of the 195 countries have included Hepatitis B in their universal child immunization programs. The product is available in plenty at highly affordable prices in the country. An affordable cold chain to ensure the supply of vaccine has also been developed by an Indian technologist, Rajendra Shende at the UN Environment Program in Paris. In fact, President Kalam has bought two of these "solar chill" plants and installed it at Rashtrapati Bhavan to demonstrate its effectiveness to the nation. The country has everything. For want of a few crore rupees in a booming economy, the future citizens of this country should not be made to suffer from a vaccine-preventable disease.

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