

Long ignored, disease prone North East catches govt attention

02 September 2013 | News | By Rahul Koul Koul

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The people of North-East have been facing a challenge posed by lung fluke, a disease that is clinically confused with tuberculosis due to its signs and symptoms. These peculiar problems have been attributed to its geography and long international borders with several countries which make human population vulnerable to transmission of many communicable diseases like influenza and vector borne diseases.

Recent data from the Indian Council for Medical Research's (ICMR) National Cancer Registry Programme has been an eye opener showing a very high prevalence of mouth (hypopharynx) and upper gastrointestinal tract (oesophagus) cancer, which is several times higher when compared with other parts of the country. For example, oesophagus cancer in East Khasi Hills is 14 fold higher than that in Delhi and 5 fold higher than that in Dibrugarh in Assam. This problem of clustering of cancers in East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Kamrup district of Assam deserves special attention and research programmes are being planned to understand the specific causes to mount an effective response.

Speaking on the sidelines of an event on biotechnology at Guwahati, the health minister of India mentioned that now government is seriously looking at mitigating few of these issues on a priority basis. "The problem of meningitis outbreaks and increase in number of adult cases of Japanese Encephalitis in some districts of Assam has caught our attention."

Azad elaborated that ICMR is taking steps to set up advanced centres in different states of North East which will be coordinated by its Regional Institute at Dibrugarh. A multi-disciplinary research unit has been established in Assam Medical College, Dibrugarh. Laboratories have been approved for Guwahati, Assam and Agartala, Tripura and planning for establishing ICMR Centres at Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh is at an advanced stage.

The minister added further, "The health ministry will do its utmost to ensure coordination with DBT, DST, DRDO and other science departments to get the maximum benefits from improving the medical and life-sciences research scenario and its consequent impact on medical education and patient care in Assam and other North Eastern states."