

Govt intends to eradicate Kala Azar within a year

11 July 2014 | News | By BioSpectrum Bureau

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Dr Harsh Vardhan, union health minister, has formed a core group to plan a detailed course of action to eradicate the dreaded vector-borne disease Kala Azar by 2015.

In 2004, the government had set a target of wiping out the disease by 2008. It was then revised twice, once to 2010 and eventually 2015. With less than a year to go, the newly installed Health Minister reviewed the resources at his disposal and expressed confidence in achieving the objective.

Kala Azar is globally known as Visceral Leishmaniasis, a zoonotic infection whose carrier is the sand fly found in eastern UP, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. It usually strikes during the monsoon months. It is the second deadliest vector borne disease after malaria. Presently, its incidence is concentrated to about 54 districts, with Bihar the most affected. Ninety percent of visceral leishmaniasis cases occur in 5 countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sudan and Brazil.

The minister has named Dr Ranjit Roy Chaudhury, a leading clinical pharmacologist who headed WHO's Rational Use of Drugs in India program, to coordinate a group of experts and officials which includes former Health Minister, Dr C P Thakur, head of Indian Council of Medical Research; Dr V M Katoch, director general of health services (DGHS); Dr Jagdish Prasad, a specialist in pharmaceuticals; Mrs Kavita Khanna, the head of the National Vector Borne Disease Control Program; Dr A C Dhariwal, the health secretaries of Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, and joint secretary in the union health ministry, Mr Anshu Prakash.

As Kala Azar strikes mainly during the monsoon months, the Minister said there is precious little time to lose. Therefore, he intends to launch the first free treatment drive in selected pockets of Bihar and other states in August. The first meeting of the core group will be held later this week to draw up a plan of action.

"One of the first tasks before the committee would be to select appropriate medication for the treatment of victims because

the drug policy on Kala Azar has been under review for a number of years. I have advised the core group to expedite the process because unless we strike fast, a great many lives would be lost," Dr Harsh Vardhan said.

In the 1920s, the late Dr U N Brahmachari's research led to the use of Sodium Stibogluconate as a breakthrough in treatment lines, the Health Minister stated. However, today's patients have developed resistance to this drug. Now three other drugs are being used but without much empirical evidence on their success. One of them, which is usually used for chemotherapy of breast cancer patients, has serious side-effects, he added.

Mission mode

Dr Harsh Vardhan said the country's progress against Kala Azar had been unsatisfactory. At the present rate, eradication of the disease by 2015 looks uncertain because the health infrastructure in the affected states is quite inadequate, he noted.

"I am however confident of the positive values in people from all walks of life. If people could lend a hand and eradicate polio, then kala azar is child's play. I am confident of receiving full cooperation from people in all walks of life," Dr Harsh Vardhan said.

While on tour in the United States recently, he had been requested by Dr Tom Frieden, director of the Centre for Disease Control, Atlanta, not to dismantle the excellent social mobilisation and surveillance networks built up for pulse polio and to make use of the men and material from that program for drives against measles and other deadly communicable diseases.

"There is no question of forgetting the lessons of Pulse Polio. We will not fritter away the gains in terms of the social mobilisation so that health for all becomes a mass movement", Dr Harsh Vardhan added.