

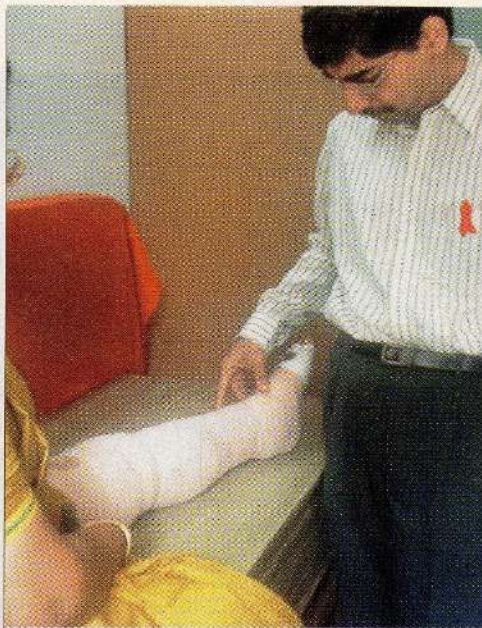
MEDICINE

Cocktail regime chains elephantiasis

BY RAMU PATIL

Disabling and disfiguring are the first reactions to lymphatic filariasis, popularly called elephantiasis because of the gross deformity it brings to the legs. This widespread revulsion to the disease prompted Dr S.R. Narahari to experiment treating elephantiasis with best practices in allopathy, homoeopathy, ayurveda and yoga. Narahari is director, Institute of the Applied Dermatology (IAD), Kasaragod, Kerala.

Narahari and his team have treated nearly 500 patients. "I think we have just begun a movement and hope that it helps more and more people," he says. The IAD's integrated regime has been praised in international medical journals such as *Lymphoedema* (UK) and *Lymphology* (USA). The Indian Council of Medical Research's ethical committee cleared the regime in 2004. Microscopic, thread-like parasitic worms transmitted by mosquitoes



SIGN OF HOPE: Dr Narahari

cause elephantiasis and nearly 25 million Indians are estimated to be suffering from it.

After completing his MD in 1990 from Kasturba Medical College in Manipal (now Manipal Academy of Higher Education), Narahari wanted to teach medicine. But that did not work out, and he started practice in Kasaragod because the town did not have any dermatologist then. Says he: "I began as a pure allopath and used to tell patients to live with some diseases as they could not be cured. But some of these responded positively to ayurvedic and homoeopathic treatment; I grew inquisitive and probed."

This probing led him to skilled practitioners of these alternative systems. But sometimes answers eluded this soft-spoken doctor. Says he: "My research involved doctors from other systems of medicine and that is how IAD was started in mid-90s." Eventually, the integrated regime evolved. It took him nearly four years to bring in mutual orientation among the different doctors. "It was a big challenge to understand each other's language," he says. "But we did that. Once that was done, it took us another six years to convince western experts."

At the IAD, doctors do not encroach upon each other's exper-

tise. Ayurvedics, homoeopaths and allopaths work in cooperation and prescribe drugs and remedies from their respective fields. When a patient is treated simultaneously or serially, the regime is decided after a collective clinical judgment by all doctors treating the patient. The regime is case specific, as all patients need not receive all systems of treatment simultaneously. The use of yoga in the regime was done to ensure drainage of the lymph. In all cases, the treatment begins only after patient gives a written consent.

The regime is affordable and effective. Patients have to be in the hospital for the first 14 days and can continue the treatment at home, says Narahari, whose wife, Prasanna, is also a dermatologist. The couple says their joy comes from what little they have been able to do for society. Their two sons are in school.

"I grew up in an intellectual environment," says Narahari. "My father never used to speak of money. He used to give me lots of books to read. As a child, I was hooked to science shows on radio stations like Voice of America and BBC. In fact, I wanted to become an engineer and even joined an engineering college, but later switched over to medicine."

Most patients at IAD want to remain anonymous and refused to be photographed because of the stigma attached to the disease. "After a long time I can walk without pain and difficulty," says a 23-year-old man. Suffering from elephantiasis for the past 13 years, his right leg weighed 24kg and left 17 kg. After treatment at IAD, the weight reduced to 12kg and 9kg, respectively.

But Narahari is ever humble of his achievements. "What we do at IAD is not rocket science," he says. "It is all about common sense. I am just doing what a doctor can do. If all Indians try their best to give something back to society, India will soon become a developed country." ■

THAT'S A GOOD RIDE!

"We don't ride to commute, we commute to ride," reads the motto of Mumbai Inddie Thumpers, a bike club.

Of late, bikers are playing the roles of agents of change. Using their network, bike clubs take up campaigns on social issues and go on rides to spread awareness on AIDS or polio or communal harmony, to promote blood donation, and to raise funds for charity.

Says a member of northeast-based Aizwal Thunder Club: "Riding a Bullet shows you are a real man, and a real man must always be ready to help those in need."