

Deal with cancer, like dealing with lifestyle diseases



A risk reduction strategy, combined with affordable drugs is the need of the hour

HYDERABAD, JULY 17:

AIDS, the dreaded disease that killed thousands and sent waves of alarm across the globe three decades ago, now stands reasonably tamed, with very few people dying due to it. Similarly, high levels of bad cholesterol, which was identified as the biggest risk factor for heart disease has been managed with a range of affordable drugs.

Citing these two examples, a leading cancer expert from Australia, Warwick Tong said, “We should think of cancers in this light to find a way out. A risk reduction strategy with a combination of drugs that are reasonably affordable and carry tolerable side effects is the urgent need.”

Tong, who is also the CEO of Australia’s Cancer Therapeutics Cooperative Research Centre, is here in India, on a Australia Government sponsored tour, meeting pharma companies and the heads of top medical institutes, to discuss Indo-Australian collaboration in research.

In an interview with Business Line, he remarked that in the next one to two decades, cancer could join the list of lifestyle diseases like diabetes, BP, etc, that require routine screening for people over the age of 40.

“There will be simple diagnostic tests, like say a blood test which can identify circulating tumour cells or genomic tests which will predict people at risk at an early stage of life. Then, there will be a combination of potent drugs which can better manage several cancers.” To buttress this hope of effective and affordable drugs in the future, Tong illustrates with the example of Tamoxifen.

The drug was discovered in the 1960s for late stage treatment of breast cancer. In recent times, it has turned into an early stage drug of preference and has now become an affordable and generic drug.

Tong leads his Cooperative, which works at the cutting edge of medical research to develop new cancer drugs.

He explains, “The current cancer drugs make people very unwell. They are also often very expensive. For example during the period 2002-14 a large number of drugs have been approved for cancer treatment. The best results on average they have given is extending the lives of patients between 2-4 months, but the costs have been prohibitive.”

Positive progression

There is a need to for intensive research to improve this. Collaborative work between Australia and India, where cancers are on the rise, will yield constructive results.

Describing cancer as a disease of the ageing, Tong said that in Australia, one out of two is expected to get some sort of cancer in their lifetime, while one in five will die of it. When asked about the cancers, for which modern medicine has made headway in treatment and cure, Tong said, "Testicular cancers in men are being treated well. Leukaemia in children, colon cancer and to a large extent, early stage breast cancers in women are being tackled effectively."

He mentions that another major progress is zeroing in on definitive risk factors like smoking, hepatitis, papilloma virus as causes for certain cancers. This list has to be enlarged and attacked with specific drugs so that the quality of life can be improved.

"Big pharma companies are ploughing in big bucks into research which is moving from organ specific (breast, lung etc), to pathways related, which is more realistic. It can lead to personalised medicine and drugs to halt progression of the cancers." Tong foresaw a strategy of early detection through tests which predict who are at risk. The next is to detect early stage cancers so that drugs can be targeted to halt the progression of the disease. This could happen in the next 20-25 years.

Promising steps

On India, Tong said the fabulous strengths built up by pharma majors in generics and making drugs available at cheaper prices not just in India but globally should come in handy in the fight to tame cancer.

"I see interest among smaller companies to take up risky piece of research. There is need for big companies also to support them and invest capital in drug research as an ageing country needs to be well prepared to handle what's in store."