

# WHO NEEDS chickenfeed?

Even as a pharmaceutical major pushes a chickenpox vaccine for India, experts insist it is not necessary, says **PRERNA K. MISHRA**

**T**HE chickenpox vaccine is finally here almost 15 years after its launch in Japan. Recently, SmithKline Beecham, the multi-national responsible for getting this vaccine called Varilex to India, sponsored an event on the epidemiology and prevention of the disease. This has kick-started a debate as to whether this vaccine should at all be promoted in the country.

B. W. Lee, Associate Professor of Paediatrics, National University, Singapore, one of the speakers at the meet, says: "Though chickenpox is a self-limiting disease, the vaccine can prevent a lot of discomfort and suffering caused to the patients."

But does India need such a vaccine? Opinions differ. Lee, who is also Consultant Immunologist, National University Hospital, Singapore, feels that India being a tropical country, the disease is more prevalent among adults. So, vaccination can be of great help. But Anupam Sibal, Consulting Paediatrician, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, disagrees. "India has more pressing infectious diseases to concentrate on. Prescribing vaccination for a self-



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**B. W. LEE,**  
Associate Professor of Paediatrics, National University, Singapore

**"Prescribing a vaccine for chickenpox in a situation where even deadlier diseases are not being prevented, is rather unethical."**

**ANUPAM SIBAL,**  
Consulting Paediatrician, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital



reason, like in cases of transplant, this vaccine is a saviour."

Agrees Arvind Taneja, Consulting Paediatrician, Holy Family, and an infectious disease expert. Though chickenpox vaccination has been introduced into the child immunisation programme of Asian countries like Japan and Korea, India is not in a position to do so. "One look at the economic development here and you'll know that we don't really have resources to invest in such vaccines," he says. "There are fatal diseases still crying for attention here."

With the company pricing it at Rs 1,200, the vaccine is mainly for the upper segment of the society and can be best prescribed to only those pa-

tients who have enough resources at their disposal. "This should also be limited to cases where the child has not been infected with the virus till the age of 12," Taneja adds. Another factor to be kept in mind, says Taneja, is that it's too early to comment upon whether this vaccine gives life-time immunity or not. It has just been there for the last 15 to 20 years.

There are experts, however, who say that it's the doctor's duty to keep the patient informed. "There is no denying the fact that the vaccine is effective and can save a patient from a lot of suffering. If a patient can pay for it, it's best to let him decide," says Krishan Chugh, Consulting Paediatrician, Ganga Ram Hospital.

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## Jadeja hits out for jaundice awareness

By Our Staff Reporter

NEW DELHI, Feb. 23.

A yellow alert was sounded here on Tuesday evening. A Children's Awareness and Support Programme — (CLASP) was launched by Mr. Vinod Khanna, MP, and cricketer Ajay Jadeja.

The "yellow alert" is to create awareness about the need for early identification of jaundice in babies.

CLASP has produced two booklets, 'Liver Disorders in Childhood' and 'Early Identification in Infants' written by Dr. Anupam Sibal. CLASP will also highlight the need to prevent Hepatitis 'B' and 'C'.

Mr. Khanna said people affected by the Hepatitis B virus number 500 times more than those affected by AIDS.

"I am aware of the problems involved in Hepatitis B. I lost my father a few years ago. He underwent an operation and in the process was given a blood transfusion. He came down with the Hepatitis B virus and died suddenly. Had it not been for the virus, he would have lived for another 20 or 25 years," he said.

Wishing the programme success, Mr. Khanna said thousands of children die because of liver disease and yet there is no awareness. He said jaundice in babies is quite common in India and by the time parents switch to a specialised doctor, it is often too late.

Ajay Jadeja said awareness about liver disease is vital and the media can play a crucial role.

"I wasn't sure what I was coming for. Once I knew, it was scary, it is a cause for which we should all come forward," he said.

It is parents who are affected as kids are too young to feel the agony. He said on behalf of cricketers: "we will do all we can to further this cause".

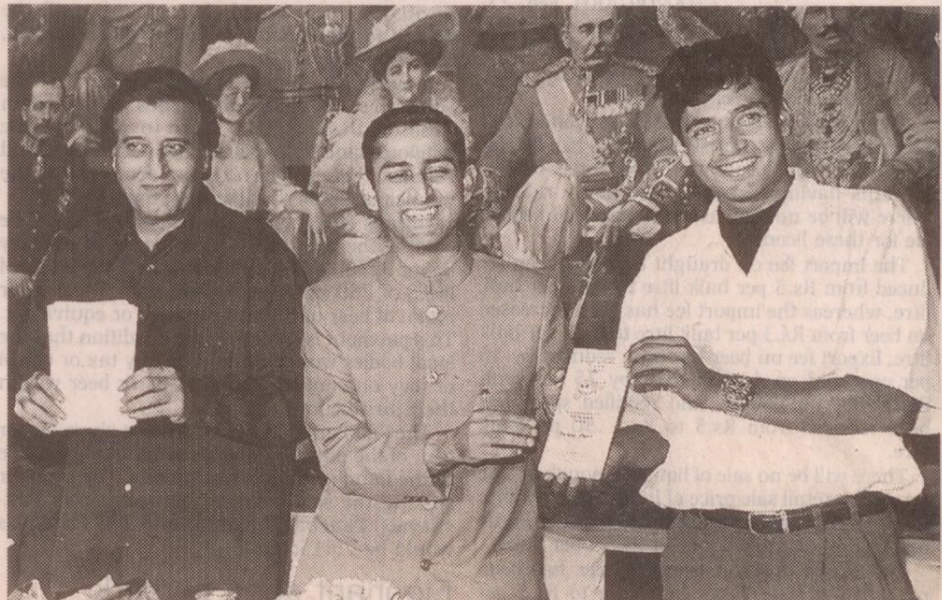
He said it was not just a question of releasing some awareness booklets. "I would like to go around villages and see affected people."

Dr. Anupam Sibal, said early identification of jaundice in babies is important. Ninety per cent of normal babies have jaundice after birth which clears within 10 days. If the jaundice persists beyond two weeks, the baby can have serious liver disease and needs to see an expert for urine and blood tests.

Sibal said four crore Indians carry the Hepatitis B virus and two crore Hepatitis C. Every year, 270,000 babies are born with Hepatitis B. Of the nearly 1,20,00 cases of liver cancer per year, 80 per cent are related to Hepatitis B and C. Yet, Hepatitis B vaccination is not provided under

the universal immunisation programme and testing of blood for Hepatitis C before blood transfusion has not been made mandatory.

Dr. S. Ramalingaswami, a senior medical practitioner and WHO Consultant, was present. Established in association with the Children's Liver Disease Foundation, UK, CLASP is a Project run by the Shri Ram Washeshran Devi Bhatta Memorial Charitable Trust. It aims to undertake and promote medical and scientific research relating to pediatric liver disorders and lay down guidelines to standardise treatment of common liver diseases through expert panels.



Mr. Vinod Khanna MP, and Ajay Jadeja releasing a booklet on liver disease in children. With them is the author of the booklet, Dr. Anupam Sibal in New Delhi on Tuesday.

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## Q STRAIGHT ANSWERS

### **Anupam Sibal**

Consultant paediatric gastroenterologist,  
Indraprastha Apollo Hospital  
**on Yellow Alert, a  
campaign for early  
identification of liver  
diseases in infants**

**Are liver diseases such a serious problem that you need programmes like the one you have launched?**

The problem is really serious. There are more hepatitis infections than HIV infections. Hepatitis is 200 times more common than HIV. Four per cent of the population are hepatitis-B carriers. If the disease is diagnosed early, there is hope for successful treatment. The only good thing about hepatitis is the availability of a vaccine, unlike none for HIV.

**What is the difference between jaundice and hepatitis?**

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver whereas jaundice is a discolouration caused by a liver disease. While hepatitis A and E (mostly referred to as jaundice) are viral infections and are transitory, hepatitis B and C can lead to liver



damage and even death. Hepatitis B and C are spread through the same route as HIV — blood transfusion, unprotected sex and exchange of needles among drug addicts. In India, 2,70,000 children are infected with hepatitis B from birth. If the disease is not detected and treated, 90 per cent will become carriers and infect others. In children, if liver diseases are not detected and treated within the first three months, they can become tricky. The treatment costs around Rs 1.5 lakh and the success rate is only 50 per cent.

**Considering it is such a huge threat, is prevention of hepatitis a part of the government's health plan?**

No. It would cost the exchequer Rs 300 crore annually to include the hepatitis vaccine in the existing free immunisation programme for children. In private hospitals, paediatricians are aware of the implications and vaccinate newborns. Awareness and preventive measures are so poor that screening for hepatitis C is not done at blood banks. I am doubtful whether the blood at these banks is screened properly even for hepatitis B, though it is mandatory.

**What is the focus of your Yellow Alert campaign?**

We are trying to reach out to people and create awareness about liver diseases. We want to tell parents that 90 per cent of all newborns get jaundice. If it does not disappear in the first two weeks after birth, it could mean a liver disease. The earlier the child is brought to the doctor for treatment, the easier it is to treat the child and cure it.

Liberty D Veedon