

Cancer-affected eyes can be saved, say doctors

Experts point out that latest treatment using chemotherapy and thermotherapy can help in disease depicted in award-winning film *Shwaas*

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A HEART-RENDING narrative, the national award winning film *Shwaas* is a powerful depiction of how the hapless kid Parshya loses his eyesight to cancer. But what was true in the film may no longer be a reality in everyday life.

Paediatric oncologists vouch for the fact that eyes of children affected by retinoblastoma can be saved.

"There is suddenly a lot of public interest in retinoblastoma due to the Marathi film *Shwaas*. The story is based on a real life event which took place a few years ago," says Dr Salil Gadkari, vitreoretina surgeon, who feels that certain facts need to be put in perspective about the disease.

"It is only natural that the story deals with a particular case

which needed removal of the eyes. Yet, the larger picture today has changed thanks to new modalities of treatment which allow us to save at least one eye most of the times and even both. The treatment protocol is standard and offered in many centres internationally. It is neither experimental nor exclusive. This treatment has moved from journals to standard texts on the subject," says Gadkari.

Gadkari, along with Dr Shailesh Kanvinde, paediatric oncologist, has been jointly handling these cases since 1999. Over 35 cases have been treated by them in the last five years and they were among the first to create awareness about eye conservation in retinoblastoma. It is the commonest Intra ocular tumour of childhood and occurs in approximately 1 in 20,000 live births.

"About 25 to 35 per cent of patients have bilateral tumours.



Ashwin Chitale and Amol Palekar at the felicitation of actors of *Shwaas* in the city on Wednesday. The programme was organised by Numaviya 75 — Newsline photo by Ravindra Joshi

The average age at diagnosis is about 18 months. In the absence

of any treatment or gross delay, the final outcome is death. The

treatment offered even today is in the form of enucleation which

means removal of the affected eyeball, in most hospitals. This can be prevented in a majority of cases with a combination of chemotherapy and thermotherapy," says Gadkari.

The paediatric oncologist does a lumbar puncture, bone marrow biopsy and CT scan of the brain to rule out spread of the cancer. The treatment involves chemotherapy along transpupillary laser thermotherapy. Chemotherapy is given in cycles every month for eight to 12 months. Contrary to the fear of parents, the children tolerate this reasonably well and continue to grow normally. This decreases the tumour size by a third.

The laser energy in the infrared wavelength, is of low intensity to prevent damage to surrounding tissues but is given over a long duration to cook the tumour right up to its core. This microwave-like cooking finally

kills all the tumour cells. While some advanced tumours may not amenable to this treatment, at least one eye can be salvaged in bilateral cases.

Gadkari had acquired a laser with software upgraded to treat these patients. It requires a special system to deliver the laser beam into the eye. Since it was planned to be a charitable activity, donors were sought to fund the delivery system to the tune of Rs seven lakh. However lack of awareness of this condition prevented funding.

Patients have had to make multiple trips to Hyderabad to L V Prasad Eye Institute to take this laser treatment as it is not available here in Pune. This is a major problem for patients from the poor socio-economic strata. Based in Pune, such a service would be a major help for patients from all over the state. Donors may contact for contributions and details 9822901992.