

## HEALTH

## BATTLING LIVER CANCER

A new therapy, Chemoembolisation, offers hope against the killer

**P**HILIP, a 45-year-old builder, suddenly experienced bouts of excruciating pain whenever he moved his right shoulder. For the last few months he had been feeling a vague sense of heaviness in the right side of his abdomen, combined with a loss of appetite and weight. He attributed all these to the stress involved in the completion of his latest building project. But the pain in his shoulder compelled him to make a visit to his physician.

His doctor told him that he had lost a lot of weight, his liver was swollen and he had to undergo further tests. Philip was then put through a battery of tests, which included a CT scan. This revealed multiple tumours in his liver, which was then biopsied. The diagnosis was liver cancer.

Doctors told Philip that his tumour was inoperable and chemotherapy would not be beneficial. Like all internal malignancies, liver cancer, medically hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), is often detected late when surgery and chemotherapy are of little help. Pain and progressive jaundice soon sets in and these patients usually die in six months. Philip probably had three to six months to live.

With two children still in school and his projects incomplete he was willing to move the earth to live. Luckily he heard of a woman who had come out of a similar affliction after using a different kind of therapy. When he went to visit Mariamma, Philip found an elderly woman busy with household chores. He was surprised to learn that she

was the very person he had come to meet.

Mariamma had been bedridden a year ago with no hope of survival, when a doctor relative of hers suggested chemoembolisation. That took her to the Kovai Medical Centre in Coimbatore where this technique is being used.

The treatment involves inserting a fine tube into the blood vessels to reach the tumour. The anti-cancer drug mixed with medical-grade iodised poppy seed oil is injected into the tumour. The blood vessel is then blocked with gelfoam, a biodegradable product, to allow the highly concentrated drug prolonged contact time with the tumour. This results in destruction of the tumour, without affecting the normal liver and without the side-effects associated with conventional chemotherapy. This procedure is repeated two to three times depending on the size of the tumour in an interval of three to four weeks.

Today Mariamma is full of life. Philip, too, underwent the procedure and according to him, has had a rebirth.

Chemoembolisation has been immensely rewarding, say Dr Mathew Cherian and Dr Ramnathan Jayaraman, the interventional radiologist and oncologist team at the Kovai Medical Centre. They have been using this method to treat liver cancer over the last two years and claim that more than 80 per cent of the patients showed excellent response to the therapy.

*Names of patients have been changed to conceal their identity.*



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## More hope

**THERE** are more than 20 lakh cancer patients in India, and five lakh new cases are added every year. In this depressive scenario comes some good news: Biological E (BE), a Hyderabad-based pharmaceutical company has launched two new anti-cancer drugs, Intron- $\alpha$  and Betaxel. Intron- $\alpha$  is a product used to treat leukemia and other forms of

cancer. It also has several other therapeutic applications and is widely used in the treatment of hepatitis. Intron- $\alpha$  has been made available at an affordable price, which will make it possible to cut down the cost of treatment for various forms of blood cancers.

Betaxel, on the other hand, is a novel anti-microtubule agent for the treatment of advanced breast cancer, ovarian and lung cancer.