Curbs on morphine eased, but
govt ill-prepared to meet demand

OPIUM CULTIVATION

- Opioids are derivatives of opium and other synthetic substances such as morphine. They are most helpful in treating severe pain. When used correctly, they relieve pain so that the person can get back to normal activities.

- In India, India, Australia, Peru, Spain, and Hungary are the major legal cultivators of opium poppy in the world.

- In India, poppy fields are strictly regulated by the government and are mostly in Arunachal, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh.

- According to existing regulations, agencies in India have to be approved by the Indian Pharmacopoeia Commission (IPC) to cultivate and process morphine.

- Narcotics are then shipped to one of India's few processing plants - all Gharapuri in Uttar Pradesh or Kurnool in AP.

New Delhi: The NSP Act, 2015 that was passed by the Rajya Sabha on Friday a day after the Lok Sabha passed it. With this, restrictions on the use of narcotic drugs like morphine for medicinal purposes, especially for pain management, are set to be eased.

However, it is India's role as the world's major legal producer of morphine that is causing concern. The country is estimated to have a morphine production capacity of 4200-6000 MT per annum.

In the circumspect Indian private sector, the public sector would be expected to produce morphine. But the industry is unlikely to be interested because of straitening conditions on expanding opium.

There are occasional provisions in the NSP Act for the slightest deviation from the punishment that can be imposed. This is an issue the amendment must address.

The standing committee on the amendment to the amendment bill, had strongly recommended a provision to allow compensating for offenses. This would allow innovation of new formulations, especially for legitimate and restricted uses.

This recommendation has not been heeded, and the industry is likely to remain wary of enacting opium refining.

Otherwise, there are significant relaxations. At present, four to five licenses from different agencies need to be procured and stored opioids. With the new amendment, the licensing power has been transferred to the authority responsible for the state food and drug administration, and the power to regulate and frame rules will be vested with the Drug Controller General of India.

"This will greatly ease the licensing of morphine availability in the country. This will have a huge impact on millions of patients of cancer, AIDS, and severe pain conditions that need pain management," said Dr S N Ravish, president of the Indian Association of Palliative Care.

"There will be a surge in demand as more hospitals and doctors will start procuring and stocking morphine. The next step would be to ensure local manufacture to meet the huge demand. The actual demand is likely to be much more than 30,000 to 40,000 kg per year," explained Devesh Malhotra, chairman of the NSP.