

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

Rema Nagarajan | TNN

New Delhi: The bill to amend the NDPS Act was passed by Rajya Sabha on Friday, a day after Lok Sabha had 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. The irony, however, is that India does not have the capacity to meet the surge in demand that will follow.

India is one of the biggest producers of opium, but it exports most of what it produces, earning about Rs 150 crore in the process. For domestic use, government factories in Neemuch and Ghazipur produce just 250 kg of morphine. Now that its availability has been made easier, the demand is estimated to surge to 30,000-40,000 kg a year.

In the circumstance, the private sector would be expected to produce morphine. But the industry is unlikely to be interested because of stultifying conditions on refining of opium.

There are draconian provisions in the NDPS Act. For the slightest inadvertent lapse, the punishment is jail. This is an issue the amendment doesn't address.

The standing committee on finance, which examined the amendment bill, had

OPIMUM CULTIVATION

► **Opioids** are derivatives of opium and similar 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

► **Turkey, India, Australia, France, 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 Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh

► According to existing regulations, narcotics in India have to be procured from licensed farmers strictly under the surveillance of the Central Narcotics Bureau. The narcotics are then shipped to one of India's two processing plants — at Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh or Neemuch in MP

strongly recommended a provision to allow compounding of offences. This would allow imposition of fines, especially for legitimate entities. But since this recommendation hasn't been heeded, the industry is likely to remain wary of entering opium refining.

Otherwise, there are significant relaxations. At present, four to five licenses from different agencies, with different periods of validity, are needed to procure and store opioids. With the amendment, the licensing power has been transferred to a single authority, the state food and drug administration, and the power to regulate and frame rules will be vested with the Drug Con-

troller General of India.

"This will totally change the landscape of morphine availability in the country. This will have a huge impact on millions of patients of cancer, AIDS, and several other conditions that need pain management," said Dr S N Simha, 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 will be to ensure local manufacture to meet the huge demand. The actual demand in India is estimated to be as much as 30,000 to 40,000 kg per year," explained Devesh Malladi, chairperson of the NDPS

sub-committee of the Indian Drug Manufacturers Association (IDMA).

He added that the government was already working towards privatization of opiate-based pharmaceuticals. Private players will be allowed to extract narcotic alkaloids such as morphine and codeine.

But because of the catch mentioned earlier, this may not quite happen. So far, the opiate trade was strictly a government business. But the demand far outstrips what the government can handle. In its factories in Ghazipur and Neemuch, the government manufactures codeine for the pharma industry, mostly for cough syrup. The government supplies just 15 tonnes of codeine when the actual demand is 60 tonnes. Hence the government has to import 45 tonnes annually.

"The government is exporting opium gum, the raw material, because we don't have the capacity to make active ingredients. Even if the industry was privatized today and facilities set up here, it would take at least 5-7 years for indigenous manufacture of opioids. Till then, the demand would have to be met by imports. This import would be four or five times in value of what the government is earning by exporting opium gum," said Malladi.

Govt. Policy.