

He Took Pain to Ease Sufferings of Many

MR Rajagopal spearheaded efforts that brought about regulatory change to improve access to morphine



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The Lok Sabha that just came to the end of its five-year term in last week will go down in history as one of the least productive. But they got one thing right. The amendment of the controversial Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act marked the culmination of years of efforts by MR Rajagopal and others to ease the needless suffering of cancer and HIV patients, many of them terminally ill, by improving access to morphine-based medicines, which are among the cheapest and most effective treatments for chronic pain. Morphine sulphate is a byproduct of opium and India is one of the few countries that allows the planting of poppy seeds, from which opium is derived. But the law governing narcotic substances has prevented large numbers of patients from accessing morphine-based painkillers in the coun-

try, creating an artificial scarcity that's more ironic as India is the world's largest legal exporter of morphine sulphate.

The amendment essentially scraps the long list of licences required to obtain and store morphine sulphate by drug makers and hospitals. Under the new act there will be a uniform regulation across states for giving out licences to manufacture morphine-based drugs. Similarly, each medical institution that previously needed four to five different licences for storing morphine will now have to approach just the state Food and Drug Administration (FDA). "I am finding it very difficult to contain my happiness. This is finally a reality, the whole palliative care community is rejoicing at the news," said Rajagopal, who's an anaesthesiologist by training, on the phone from Thiruvananthapuram. But he adds that there's more to be done. "Now, it is time for state governments to play their part." Rajagopal has been a vociferous advocate of using morphine for cancer patients because that's the only form of cheap and effective relief available from the painful effects



of chemotherapy and radiation. "Pain relief is a human right and any stringent regulation against access to drugs is a violation of that right," he said. A public interest litigation filed by Rajagopal in 2008 put the spotlight on the issue of palliative medicine and care in India. This is an area of healthcare that's concerned

with relieving and preventing the suffering of terminally ill patients. "The petition essentially wanted to highlight that if you are a patient, you do not have to suffer in pain, you can be pain free and if that can be achieved with low cost, then why not," said Poonam Bagai, who runs the NGO CanKids, who was also a co-petitioner to the PIL. Bagai, a cancer survivor herself, said Rajagopal brought the issue of palliative care into the public domain and also presented it as an area of science and not some sort of charity. Rajagopal was instrumental in setting up the Institute of Palliative Medicine in Kozhikode, Kerala — the first of its kind in the country. He also shaped the palliative care policy of the Kerala government, a model that other states could follow. Currently director of the Trivandrum Institute of Palliative Sciences, Rajagopal was responsible for the specialisation gaining importance as a field of study in India. "If we have a formal academic degree in palliative medicine, it is because of him," said P. Vijayanand, director, Axon Pain Center in Hyderabad.

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