

A burning issue

More burn patients in India die of ignorance about it than the injury itself, and the ignorance strikes at many different levels — public, sociocultural, even medical and paramedic

India loses 150 million mandays every year on account of burn accidents and this loss translates into Rs40 crore. Nearly 800,000 persons die of burns or of complications associated with burns. Over three times that number are victims of burn accidents. There were 24 lakh cases of burn accidents in 1998. The 33 per cent fatality rate in burn accidents in India is probably among the highest in the world.

The average hospital stay ranges from three to 12 weeks, while overt injuries heal, but emotional, physical, and social rehabilitation drag on for years. Moved by the never-ending plight of the average burn patient, Manohar H. Keswani, a plastic and cosmetic surgeon by training, began a crusade to improve the treatment and rehabilitation of the patients.

He pioneered the treatment of burns in India when he set up the country's first burns unit at the Tata Department of Plastic Surgery in Mumbai's J.J. Hospital. His single-minded pursuit in creating awareness about burn accidents and prevention gradually gathered momentum and became the foundation for a one-of-its-kind research institute that will begin functioning in Airoli, Navi Mumbai, from October — the Indian Burns Research Society's Hospital.

All attention and effort will be focused on developing expertise in burns on the lines of Mumbai's Tata Memorial Hospital for cancer. There is an acute shortage of trained personnel to man burns units coming up in the country. As Asia's largest research and training institute in burns, it will train doctors, nurses, paramedical staff, and social workers in comprehensive treatment and care of burn patients. The centre will also have a 140-bed hospital. Apart from providing curative facilities it will also rehabilitate victims.

Most victims of burns in India and South Asia are women and children. Burns are also a problem of the poor and treatment costs anywhere between Rs3,000 and Rs10,000 per day. The cost covers drugs, treatment, special diet, and nursing care. The hospital hopes to generate revenue from three paying sections — pharmacy, pathology, and radiology, and may also consider admitting non-



PHOTOS: SUMATI SAMPEMANE

Mr Burns of India, Keswani is a winner of American Burns Association's Everett Memorial Award

burn patients till it breaks even. For the poor patients it hopes to provide as many concessions as possible. Ultimately, the hospital complex will also have a *dharmshala* where relatives of patients who come from distant places can stay at a nominal rent.

Keswani spared no effort to create awareness about the causes of burn accidents, highlighting the correct first aid and the need for specialised medical and psychiatric care and physiotherapy of the burn patient. He set up the Indian Burns Research Society in 1984. He devised innovative methods of treatment — a major one

is the boiled potato peel bandage. As cadaver skins were hard to come by and there was no skin bank in India, he searched for a new method of covering burn injuries. He discovered that potato peel did the trick. Soon the team of doctors got busy collecting potato peels from hotel kitchens and one doctor working with him even perfected the art of peeling potatoes to obtain the maximum length of peel possible.

All this while he was trying to convince lawmakers that skin is indeed an organ and should be treated like one in legislation on organ transplants. This is necessary to set up a skin bank. Every anatomy textbook clearly states that the skin is the largest organ in the body, but the law doesn't accept it.

Having successfully established the JJ unit in 1965, Keswani began to dream of setting up a centre dedicated to the treatment of burns. His dream began to materialise with the acquisition of the Airoli land at Rs30 lakh 11 years ago. The plot, on the shore of the Thane creek, is an ideal site — airy, close to the sea, far from the dust and pollution of the city, and yet close enough to Mumbai. Construction began five years ago and will continue for another decade, by which time it will have quadrupled its Phase-1 capacity.

Phase-1 was completed at an expense of Rs4.5 crore. The full completion will take another eight years and another Rs10 crore, according to I.H. Keswani. Manohar Keswani's son Sunil, also a plastic surgeon, is involved in the medical side. He is in Europe to accept the Whitaker Prize on behalf of his father and says he will explore the possibility of establishing collaborations with similar centres there. "The centre already has informal collaboration with leading US institutes and such collaborations will help bring in new ideas," he says.

The highlight of Keswani's dream is that the hospital will become an example for a number of comprehensive burn treatment facilities in every burn taluka. With commitment from the community, that shouldn't be difficult.