

THE LONG WAIT



“What do you think is causing the cancer?” I ask.

“It’s the water!” responds Pallo, a 70-year-old, from Mandi Dabwali, Haryana. She was diagnosed with stomach cancer three months ago after enduring a year of pain - a result of incorrect diagnosis. This is her first visit to Acharya Tulsi Regional Cancer Treatment & Research Institute in Bikaner with her son-in-law Jagroop. Acharya Tulsi is the closest government cancer hospital that is affordable.

There are a few of us waiting outside the hospital and I’m informed that many of the patients spend the night outside because they are not allowed inside the hospital after sunset. Night at a motel costs Rs. 400 – a sum big enough to compel people to spend the night on the street.

I look at Pallo and ask her what her biggest worry is, “My only worry right now is that my sons-in-law will have to pay for my treatment”. Before she can tell me more, another woman also named Pallo comes and sits next to us. She is from Ladhuka Mandi, Fazilka District, Punjab. I look into her eyes and I can sense a great loss. A loss of spirit.

She tells me that it’s the food that’s causing the cancer. “There’s poison everywhere. Men spray it and factories dump it.” She is 55 years old and this is her fifth visit to the hospital in the last five months. For her, “This is a race for poor patients like me to test what runs out faster – my money or my life”.

Through a member of Kheti Virasat Mission, a non-profit organisation, which works directly with the farmers of Punjab, I meet Paramjeet Kaur, from Maud Village in Bathinda, Punjab. She was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1990. This is when she was 20 years old. Saving her life meant losing one of her breasts. Six years later, the cancer resurfaced and she lost her other breast too. During this time, it wasn’t just the mental agony that she and her family had to go through, but it was also the medical bills that completely drained them.

Today, she is 55 years old. When I ask her what caused the cancer, she tells me that, "It was the poison in the water and of course, God's will".

After waiting for hours outside Dr. Ajay Sharma's room, a Cancer Specialist at Acharya Tulsi Regional Cancer Treatment & Research Institute, I am finally asked to come in. There's a long, endless line of patients waiting outside his room. He gives me five minutes, nothing more. Once again, I ask the same question, "What's causing the cancer?"

He responds, "Most of the cancer patients we work with come from regions where pesticide use is rampant, especially Punjab. The pesticide accumulation in the water has reached such magnitude that even bathing induces toxicity through the dermal route (skin absorption). The farmers drink the same water, wash their vegetables in the same water, leading to chronic toxicity through oral ingestion. Such hazards become more prominent as the farmers are unaware of the ill effects of pesticides on health."

On being asked what the solution is, he says, "The government should initiate a large scale awareness program on the toxicity of pesticides among farmers and prohibit highly toxic pesticides from the public sphere." Before I can ask another question, my five minutes are up and he shows me the long line of patients waiting outside.

The grave consequences of pesticides in agriculture are obvious. Another voice that echoes Dr. Ajay Sharma's opinion is Dr. GPI Singh, Vice chancellor, Adesh University, Bathinda, "Chronic diseases related to pesticide exposure include cancers, reproductive health defects, metabolic syndromes like diabetes and birth defects.

The effects are aggravated and become even more unpredictable due to use of a cocktail of pesticides. All or most are largely avoidable with rationalisation of pesticide use and mitigation of environmental toxicity. It is unfortunate that a large number of pesticides banned or restricted in many industrialized countries on grounds of human and veterinary health are still in use in developing countries like India."

This piece was written on the basis of the conversations Manvendra Singh, a Greenpeace campaigner, had with all the people mentioned above.

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