

Cheap but deadly contraceptive is on 'trial'

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NEW DELHI: Women in the third world have long been subject to trials of contraceptive pills. The latest is Quinacrine, a method to be more dangerous than the controversial Norplant.

A pioneer of this "technique" is Dr Biraj Mullick. With each "successful operation", his popularity soars. More and more women from villages and slums in and around Calcutta flock to his clinic and go back gratified because no one, not even their husband, will know they've been sterilised.

The method seems most convenient — no anaesthesia, no surgery, no hospitalisation. Just seven pellets of a cheap and easily available anti-malarial medicine called Quinacrine, inserted in the uterus — and one is externally free from the fear of unwanted pregnancies. The cost, a mere Rs 35.

What these women don't know is that they are guinea pigs being used to test the efficacy of the drug, that they are being subjected to a method not approved by any drug

regulatory authority in the world, and one against which the World Health Organisation has issued stern warnings.

Laboratory tests have indicated that Quinacrine causes mutation of cells. Further tests are on to assess if it is carcinogenic as well.

Mullick's is not the only clinic in the country carrying out these chemical "trials". Says gynaecologist Puneet Bedi, "Scores of private doctors and NGOs across the country, including a prominent doctor-politician from Delhi, are involved in this unethical practice. It's a very disturbing development where new drugs are being tested on poor unsuspecting patients."

According to him most of the women come to these clinics for a Copper T and are sent back fired with Quinacrine, a conrod agent that burns the uterine tissue and forms scars.

The inflammatory response results in the formation of scarred tissues blocking the fallopian tube and leading to irreversible sterilisation.

"It's a method which has a barbaric history going back to the Nazi concentration camps," says Dr Motian Rao, chairperson of the Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, JNU.

According to Prof Shree Muley of the McGill University, Canada, the method is most crude, imprecise and could lead to foetal pregnancy, and internal haemorrhage which could be fatal.

Not surprisingly then, it has been banned in Chile and Vietnam. In Bangladesh there has been a public outcry against its use.

In India, however, it is being used by an increasing number of unscrupulous doctors.

"What is more disturbing," says Dr Rao is that the "trials" are being largely sponsored by two US doctors, Stephen Mumford and Elton Kessel, (both head single-man NGOs) who receive funds from the right wing anti-immigration lobby in America which believes that population explosion in the third world will consume their resources, overrun their borders and ultimately cause a crisis in their country.

It is difficult to believe that all this is being done without the knowledge of the ICMR and the Drug Controller. Given the high risk involved in these clinical trials, it is appalling that the ministry of health has not moved to prevent them, say women activists.

"Allowing NGOs unbridled freedom to experiment with such dangerous drugs suggests the government's complicity and complicity with it," charges Ms Brinda Karat of AIDWA. "The ICMR and the Drug Controller seem to be turning a blind eye to this immoral and illegal practice," she adds.

The Drug Controller, however, says there's no question of allowing routine use of this drug.

Dr Rao says there is an urgent need to halt these trials and conduct follow-up studies on women who have been sterilised by Quinacrine. Others add that the ministry of health and the ICMR should be answerable to the public about such unethical "trials" by individuals and NGOs who are clearly not competent to carry them out.