

India Inc finds stem cells a healthy business

15 firms, 20 research outfits eye Rs 2,200-crore market

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In March this year, Bangalore-based Stempeutics Research received clearance from the Drug Controller General of India to conduct human clinical trials to develop drugs using stem cells.

With this, India became the first country after the US to allow human clinical trials to develop drugs by using dormant cells in the body that have natural regeneration capabilities. Once injected into a patient, the stem cells can be controlled with a simple magnet to direct them to the damaged area and cure it.

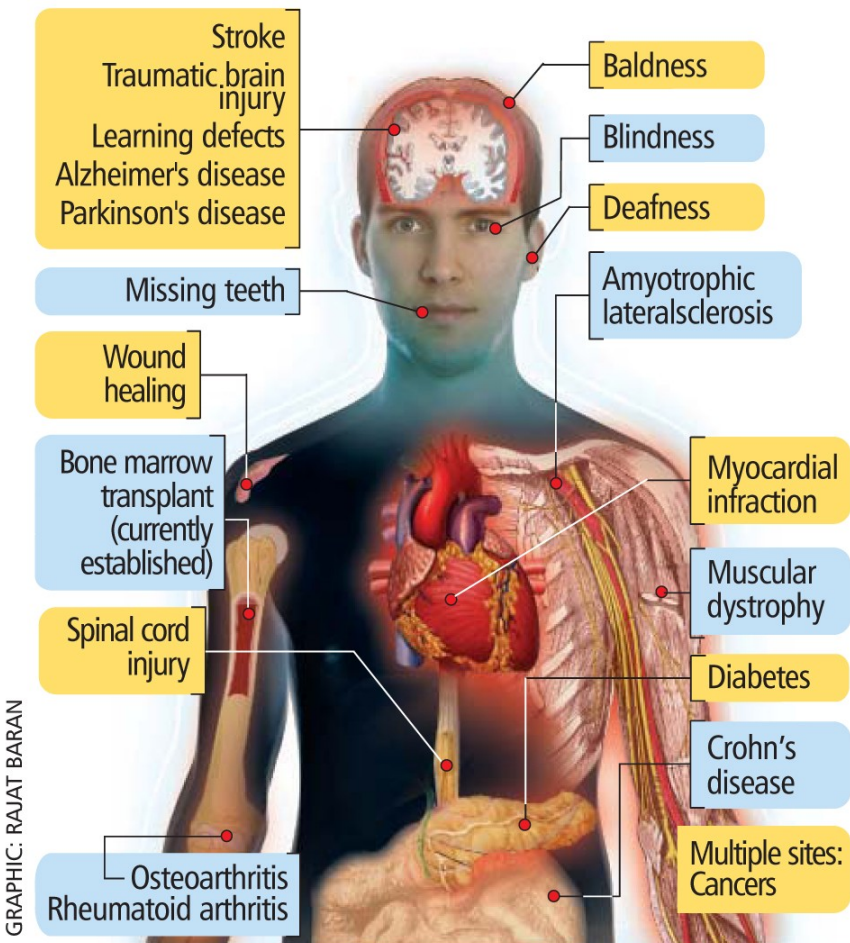
Welcome to the stem cell research boom in India – something that revived eight-year-old Pramita Aich, who was suffering from abdominal cancer. Aich underwent bone marrow stem cell transplant at the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Research Institute in Kolkata. It was the first such successful treatment in eastern India.

The growth has been phenomenal. The Stem Cell Global Foundation, a New Delhi-based organisation promoting stem cell research, estimates the business to be growing at a compounded annual growth of 15 per cent and cross Rs 2,200 crore next year. The market was nearly non-existent a few years ago. Karan Goel, chairman and founder of the foundation, says the growth estimates for other Asian countries, except China, are less than that for India.

The reason is simple: Therapies using stem cells are giving hope to millions of patients afflicted with chronic diseases. Globally, stem cells are used to treat over 130 diseases and it is estimated that more than 500 clinical trials are being done to develop therapies using stem cells. Indian companies are becoming an important part of this revolution, helping treat patients with diseases ranging from eye problems to heart disorders.

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STEM CELL: WHAT IT CAN TREAT



GRAPHIC: RAJAT BARAN

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Apart from Stempeutics, at least 20 research organisations and 15 companies such as Reliance Life Science and Lifecell are working on stem cells in India, prompting K V Subramaniam, president and CEO of Reliance Life Sciences, to say that India is one of the few countries in the world actually pursuing stem cell research.

Reliance Life, the pioneer in stem cell-based research in India on a commercial scale, has already commercialised two products. Last year, the company launched ReliNethra, a first-of-its-kind treatment in India for corneal blindness. Recently, it launched ReliHeal-G, which quickly heals wounds. The company has completed clinical trials for treatment for heart attack using stem cells from the bone marrow of the patient. It is carrying out clinical trials for application of stem cell-based therapies for skin disorder stable vitiligo, non-healing diabetic ulcers, Parkinson's disease and spinal cord injury.

There is more. India's largest stem cell banking company, LifeCell, and US-based Harvest Technologies, which manufactures devices for stem cell harvesting, are developing a unique treatment for heart attack in association with cardiologist Naresh Tehran's hospital in New Delhi and Ramachandra Medical College, Chennai.

"We have completed a pilot study of 60 patients and hope to commercialise the product in three to four years. Stem cell-based cardiovascular therapies have a potential of over Rs 3,000 crore in India," said Mayur Abhaya, executive director of LifeCell.

Stempeutics, funded by the Manipal Education and Medical Group, started two years ago and is planning to commercialise two drugs by 2011, one for heart complications and the other for limb complications. The company already owns seven patents.

Parkinson's patients in the country will be able to avail stem cell therapy services for treatment as the Mumbai-based Jaslok Hospital and Reliance Life are working together to explore using the patient's own stem cells for curing the disease. Stem cell transplants using an advanced technique of biological adhesive agent was recently carried out in eight cases at a military hospital in Jammu.

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