

City scientists plan study on HIV link to nerve disorders

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THE latest in the West is studies on neuroAIDS, where the virus can sneak into the brain to cause dementia. But Pune is not far behind. The National AIDS Research Institute (NARI) has planned an ambitious study to find the prevalence of neuro-cognitive impairment in HIV infected individuals.

NeuroAIDS is the clinical syndrome where patients forget phone numbers and at times their movement is slackened. But condition of not all HIV positive patients worsens and doctors can't predict who will go through this

neurological disorder. Earlier, *The Indian Express* had reported that scientists at the NARI had standardised tests to suit the Indian population and detect the neurocognitive impairment of HIV infected individuals.

Now, armed with a battery of 'Indian culture specific' neurological tests to diagnose symptoms which afflict at least one in five people, a collaborative study will get underway in Pune. The study partners include NARI and University of California, said Dr R S Paranjape, Director of NARI. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has given the green signal for the study, Dr Manisha Ghate, Assis-

tant Director, NARI, said.

Dr Sanjay Mehendale, Deputy Director, Senior Grade, NARI, who is the principal investigator, told *The Indian Express* that studies will be done on 300 HIV positive individuals and 300 participants who are not affected with HIV. The Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) has provided a space at Model Colony for setting up an anti-retroviral treatment (ART) centre, apart from laboratory facilities.

There is increasing evidence in the West that shows cognitive difficulties among HIV infected individuals and hence the study will include tests that check memory, motor skills and neuro-psychological function. According to

Ghate, a pilot study using these tests had been conducted among 30 HIV infected individuals and 47 per cent showed neurological impairment.

Access to anti-retroviral drugs has helped in improving the health, survival and functioning of HIV infected individuals. But since people are living longer with the virus, the overall prevalence of neuroAIDS appears to be increasing, researchers said.

"In India, we need to answer questions like what is the prevalence of these neurological changes in HIV infected individuals, how do they manifest clinically and are there any neurological benefits of anti-retroviral therapy," Ghate said.

Clinical trials

■ The National AIDS Research Institute (NARI) at Pune and Tuberculosis Research Centre (TRC) at Chennai will conduct a phase clinical trial to test a combination of two AIDS vaccine candidates.

■ Dr R S Paranjape, Director of NARI, said the two vaccine candidates include ADVAX and TBC-M4 that will be tested in a prime boost regimen. A total of 32 volunteers will be enrolled for the trial that will start soon at Pune and Chennai. YRG CARE, Chennai, will collaborate with the TRC for advocacy and community mobilisation for the phase 1 trial.

■ A statement issued here said the joint trial will be conducted by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI).

■ The TBC-M4 vaccine candidate was tested by ICMR, NACO and IAVI at a phase 1 trial at the TRC in Chennai earlier and the results were promising.

