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The medico friend circle (mfc), an All India group of socially conscious doctors and health workers has just completed a systematic study of the continued effects of toxic gas in two bastis in Bhopal.

The observations of the study conducted between March 18-25 in the highly affected Jayaprakash Nagar and the less affected Anna Nagar are yet to be fully analysed. However, the initial findings definitely indicate that : (i) the affected population is already showing signs of reduced breathing and working capacity which is likely to be permanent unless remedial measures are urgently introduced; (ii) pregnant women who had been exposed to the gas in the first three months of pregnancy or have become pregnant since the disaster have still not been informed about the possible dangers to the foetus. Moreover, detoxification measures recommended by the ICMR over a month ago--the administration of sodium thiosulphate has not been implemented. The mfc is deeply concerned and agitated about the situation.

Reduced breathing and working capacity among the affected population

The mfc's study team has observed that men are not able to go back to work because of breathlessness on accustomed exertion (exertional dyspnoea). Those who have returned to work report definitely reduced working capacities. Most women find it difficult to carry on their usual household chores. The team has noted with particular concern that very few of the children can even play or participate in normal physical activity in the affected bastis.

It is well known that a large proportion of the MIC affected population is likely to develop fibrosis of the lungs (development of scars) following inflammation of the lungs due to irritation. This condition permanently affects breathing and hence working capacity. Such a condition is already in evidence in the population covered by the mfc study.

Simple breathing exercises are known to help to reduce this disability. Information about these exercises must be widely known and their importance stressed.

Mass detoxification by sodium thiosulphate

More than a month ago the ICMR had recommended the administration of sodium thiosulphate for detoxification of all patients suffering from symptoms of MIC poisoning. This recommendation was based on conclusions drawn from a double-blind clinical study. But as yet, there appears to be no strategy in action with regard to administration of sodium thiosulphate to the vast majority of affected people. Only a tiny fraction, consisting of the seriously ill are receiving the injection.

mfc emphatically feels that as suggested by the ICMR, all patients suffering from symptoms of mic poisoning should be urgently administered sodium thiosulphate so that their suffering is reduced and they may go back to work. This service and other medical facilities should be urgently provided in a decentralised way, close to the bastic in affected areas.

The insight that sodium thiosulphate may well be effective was known even in the first week after the disaster. It is extremely disturbing and deplorable that decisions on vital issues like this which affect the lives of thousands of people should have been so long delayed. Even more shocking is the fact that even now, a month after the recommendation was publicised, mass detoxification of MIC victims has not begun.

Possible risks to the foetus

Another disturbing feature is that pregnant women who have been exposed to MIC have not been given any advice regarding the possible risks to the foetus. Given the fact that the first three months of pregnancy is the most sensitive period, it is likely that these women as well those who became pregnant immediately after the disaster are likely to give birth to deformed babies, since MIC or its breakdown products are very reactive chemicals. Moreover many of these women have received several types of drugs when as a rule in the first three months no drug should be given for fear of drug induced deformations. Some of these drugs, especially steroids are known to cause deformities.

There is an urgent need to inform people, especially women about these dangers and to advise them to undergo medical termination of pregnancy. Adequate and free facilities should be made available to those women who opt for it without

coercing them to undergo sterilisation. Further, those couples who have lost children and want reversal of sterilisation must be offered these facilities free of charge.

Doctors belonging to mfc had pointed out these dangers in an earlier note sent to the concerned authorities a month ago. But to date nothing seems to have been done.

Many of these women have by now crossed the five month limit of pregnancy beyond which MTP is unsafe. But there are some who can still terminate their pregnancy although the risks are greater than in the first weeks. Facilities for ultrasonographic examination should be made available to these women immediately to detect gross abnormalities in their fetuses.

That this is not being done is a reflection of the indifference of health authorities towards the health problems of poor women. Moreover mfc feels that the ICMR study designed to follow up these women on a long term to assess the percentage of deformities without informing women about the possible risks or the advisability of MTP is unethical. The dangers to pregnancy are well known and poor women should not be used as guinea pigs in medical research.

Contraceptive advice to affected couples

Most of the MIC affected population is still suffering from symptoms of cyanide like poisoning indicating, therefore, the persistence of the biochemical changes which have occurred due to MIC poisoning. It is safer to avoid pregnancies till complete detoxification has taken place. Since a large proportion of the women are suffering from menstrual disorders and other gynaecological problems, male contraceptives (Nirodh) should be recommended rather than Copper T or oral contraceptive pills by the women.

We demand that the health authorities should give serious and urgent consideration to the issues raised here.

released by the convenor of mfc