

Rebuilding lost organs challenge for docs

PRITHA CHATTERJEE

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 28

RUPA'S step-mother threw acid on her as she was asleep in her house in Muzaffarnagar. Writhing in pain as her face burned, she screamed for help, unable to open her eyes as the skin of her eyelids melt. This was in 2008.

Since then, she has undergone 12 surgeries at Safdarjung hospital. Doctors plucked skin from different parts of her body to repair her face and other affected areas. There could be more surgeries, which worries her when she thinks of the cost and how she is going to foot the medical bills.

"The attack was just the start of my troubles. My father stood by my step-mother. As I was looking for doctors and trying to arrange money for treatment, the only help I got was from my uncle. The treatment is painful. After every surgery, you hope this will be the last and when they remove the dressing, you will have a face again," she said.

Rupa was among scores of acid attack victims who protested in the capital last week, demanding among other things that treatment for victims be made free.

Doctors at Safdarjung hospital, which has the largest burns unit in the

country with nearly 150 beds and a dedicated burns ICU, say acid attack victims make up a small number of patients, but need long follow-up treatments, often wrought with disappointment. "The annual number of acid attack victims is very less, not more than seven-eight in a year. But the burns are deep and targeted around organs like the ear, eyes and mouth. If the acid has not been washed immediately after the attack, it leaves deformities usually in the face, which needs multiple surgeries to restore basic functionality," Dr Karoon Agrawal, head of the hospital's burns and plastic surgery unit, said.

Lok Nayak hospital, which has a two-floor burns ward and an ICU for such patients, treats four-five acid attack victims in a year.

But in view of the large number of burns patients crowding government hospitals, after initial treatment acid attack victims often have to turn to the private sector for reconstructive surgeries.

Dr (Maj-Gen) Avtar Singh Bath, head of plastic and reconstructive surgery at BLK Memorial hospital, has conducted seven surgeries on acid attack victim Sonali Mukherjee from Jharkhand after she underwent 18 procedures at Safdarjung hospital.

"Sonali had already undergone immediate burn wound management, which is the acute period immediately after an attack, at a government hospital. But there were other procedures she needed, which unfortunately are a non-priority in government hospitals because of the sheer numbers they have to manage," Dr Bath, who was formerly with Army (R&R) hospital, said.

Dr Amit Gupta, spokesperson at AIIMS, where the doctor who was attacked in Rajouri Garden last week is being treated, said, "Though the right part of her face will need reconstructive surgery, the acid burnt her right eye, causing grade IV injuries to the cornea. We washed the eye, but it's still early to say if there is loss of vision."

When Sonali came to BLK hospital, besides having lost her vision, almost half of her scalp was without hair, she had no cheeks, ears and nose. In place of these organs, there were only holes. "We had to make her ears and a nose, and conduct tissue-expansion surgeries on her scalp and cheeks. All these procedures were aimed at restoring the contours of her face as far as possible to make her look human, but by definition these reconstructive procedures are considered cosmetic in nature," Dr Bath said.

Tissue expansion involves placing expanders — usually imported — which make normal skin grow faster.

Sonali's treatment was funded by an NGO. But not all victims are as lucky. Rupa, who is a fashion designer, said each surgery cost her at least Rs 1 lakh. "I got no help from the government. Treatment for survivors should be made free and prioritised in the crowded setting of government burns wards. Besides, more doctors should be trained to treat such patients. If the affected area is immediately washed, the damage is less," she said.

Skin banks, set up in Mumbai to harvest and store human skin from deaddies, are considered a boon for burns victims in general and acid attack victims in particular, doctors say. Dr Suni Keswani, plastic surgeon at the National Burns Centre in Mumbai who started the skin bank, said, "Burns can be fatal due to infection or dehydration when the protective barrier of the skin is melted. Human skin provides the best biological dressing material, which can save acid attack victims through the acute phase of burns. More skin banks are needed across the country."

A proposal for a similar bank in Safdarjung hospital has been in the planning stage for the last five years.

WHAT THE LAW SAYS

■ The Supreme Court, in an order issued on December 3 last year, had banned over-the-counter sale of acid without identity and address proof being shown by the purchaser. The address and name of the purchaser was to be recorded in a register. The court had also directed all states and Union Territories to regulate sales of acid and other corrosive substances, in line with the model rules created by the central government.

■ The order also said that acid attack victims would be paid "at least Rs 3 lakh as compensation, with Rs 1 lakh paid within 15 days of the attack, to facilitate immediate medical attention. The balance amount was to be paid within two months.

■ In May this year, the Allahabad High Court directed that the cost of immediate medical treatment of acid attack victims would be borne by the state.

■ In July this year, the Supreme

Court, in another PIL filed by an acid attack victim, pulled up the government for the "pathetic condition" and "laxity on the part of government regarding the issue of acid attack victims". The court noted that its orders of December 2013 making it compulsory for acid sellers to keep a record of the identity and address proof of buyers was not being followed.

■ On December 24, the Delhi High Court, during a hearing on

women's safety, asked the government why acid was "still being sold freely despite SC orders". The court said it would consider taking up the issue of acid attacks in a separate suo motu case.

■ The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 2013, which added various crimes against women, also added Section 326A and 326B as specific provisions dealing with acid attacks. Under the new Section 326A, a

person who throws or administers acid on another person and causes damage or deformity is liable for imprisonment not less than 10 years and may extend to life imprisonment. Any fine that is collected under Section 326A is granted to the victim for medical expenses. An attempt to throw acid upon a person is met with imprisonment of up to seven years, but not less than five years for the attacker, under Section 326B.