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They bring sweetness and light into their bitter lives

■ The good samaritans at this Adyar hospital administer free insulin to juvenile diabetics irrespective of their economic background

By Gayatri Hazarika

Chennai, August 12

THERE are three ways to begin this story.

The cinematic way is to tell you how diabetic juveniles take two to three shots of insulin daily, and are subjected to a life minus ice creams, chocolates, sweets and physical activity like sports.

The outright wrong way would be to tell you that juvenile diabetes is on the rise here.

The correct way would be to tell you about a team of dedicated doctors and nurses who have been quietly administering free insulin and medicines to all juvenile diabetics, irrespective of their economic background, for 38 years now.

This is in keeping with true voluntary service and is instigated by the fact that very little has been done by the government for research on diabetes and its treatment, says Dr C V Krishnaswami, who heads this team of the Diabetes department, that also has a research wing, in the Voluntary Health Services (VHS) Hospital, Adyar.

A juvenile diabetic may be a diabetic of any age who has acquired Insulin-Dependent Diabetes Mellitus (IDDM) or

Type 1 Diabetes when below 15 years of age. At present, the Diabetes Department has 475 beneficiaries, many of whom have come to them as adults. Approximately 300 are on a regular follow-up with the department.

The team of six doctors, specialist nurses, a tutor in nutrition, a clinical dietician, a psychologist, a social worker and an administrator not only treat and give medicines to the diabetic children, but also follow up the cases closely, sometimes

them once every three months without fail. The department bears his train fare till date. Today, he drives a hired autorickshaw to earn his livelihood and has plans of buying his own vehicle.

Savitha is a 20-year-old standard XII Commerce student who had come for treatment when she was 12 years old. Not only is she being treated consistently by the department ever since, but her educational expenses are also taken care of.

Today, she works as a helper in the department and earns a stipend of Rs 800 a month. "I owe my education to the department," is all Savitha has to say after expressing her desire to study further.

The department has been treating diabetic women (who had come to them as children) during their "high-risk" pregnancy as well. "In the last 38 years, approximately 20 diabetic women have given birth to healthy babies under our care," says Krishnaswami. Previously, the doctors used to utilise the neo-natal facilities in the intensive care unit of Child's Trust Hospital, but this year, they have installed an intensive care unit in their department, he adds.

even getting involved in assisting their education, marriage and means to lead a decent life. This is because a number of patients coming to avail of free insulin and treatment are financially weak.

Ramesh had come for treatment from Palakkad in Kerala as a 10-year-old. He was discarded by his mother because she believed "it was more viable to take care of her healthy children than take care of him." Not only was he treated at the VHS diabetes department for free, but was also accompanied by a person from the department back to Kerala and reunited with his mother.

Ever since, for 13 years now, he has been visiting

FOCUS/Health



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They bring sweetness and light

Recently, King Boudéin Foundation of the US, after inspecting the work done by the department, donated \$10,000 through Johnson & Johnson company and promised more for the next two years, says Krishnaswami. He adds that they are never short of donors, but considering it's a non-profit organisation, it is always in need of more. The department also conducts diabetes awareness programmes regularly. The department has a rehabilitation fund from which interest-free loans of Rs 2,000 to Rs 4,000 are given to patients, especially during the festive seasons. And the very unofficial responsibilities of the department include advising youngsters/patients on marriage and children. His apparently simple story has a punchline: It is an honorary service for members of the team. Each has his or her own full-time practice.

(The names have been changed to protect identity)

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