New shelter to house cancer patients, kin stuck on pavements

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Permanently in place for 200 dharohars for outstation patients, relatives.

The heart-rending scene of poor outstation patients and their relatives camping out on the pavements near Tata Memorial Hospital, Parel, has long weighed on the minds of doctors, activists and health officials involved in the cancer fight. Now, a plan to create a dharoharshala for them nearby is gaining momentum.

All the permissions are in place for the shelter, which was proposed a few years ago, to come up on the Mithi riverbed in Parel. The construction is expected to be completed in two years.

The dharohars will be designed on the lines of the Ernest Borges Memorial Home in Bandra, and accommodation will be provided at “minimal rates”, said Dr Shridip Banavali, director of Tata Memorial’s oncology department. The Bandra home is affiliated to the hospital and houses outstation cancer patients.

Tata Memorial, the country’s top cancer-care facility, treats around 87,000 new patients from various cities, towns and villages every year and also attends to 4.5 lakh follow-up cases annually. It provides free or highly subsidised treatment in majority of the cases.

But the huge workload inevitably leads to a long waitlist despite the best efforts of doctors and the staff. Many outstation patients and their relatives cannot afford to stay in a lodge and end up on the pavement.

About 30 to 40 people are found camping outside the hospital every day. The number was much higher earlier, but Tata Memorial has worked with different organisations to provide affordable accommodation to the patients and their kin. The planned dharoharshala will be another major step in this direction.

“The immunity of cancer patients is very low and there is risk of infection. We want to ensure that none of the patients live on the pavement,” Dr Banavali said.

The shelter will come up as part of a larger Tata Memorial project on the five-acre Mithi riverbed plot, which the state government has approved. The project involves construction of a new hospital, quarters for resident doctors and other facilities.

“The dormitory for outstation patients and their kind will developed on the lines of the Bandra home with accommodation at minimal rates. There will be a common kitchen area where relatives can cook. One floor will be dedicated to paediatric patients and their family members,” Dr Banavali said, adding that the permissions were in place.

There have been instances where cancer patients from outside Mumbai quit the treatment midway because of the city’s high living costs. Some families are selling their land to support their loved one’s cancer fight. Sunil Yadav, a former from Uttar Pradesh, sold his plot so his son could be treated in Mumbai. Yadav lived on the footpath for four months.

Dr Banavali said Tata Memorial and different organisations had made significant efforts over the years to accommodate as many people as possible, especially children.

“Our staff members make rounds every day and we ensure no child suffering from cancer lives on the footpath. St Jude’s Children’s Centre offers free accommodation to paediatric patients,” he said. “Organisations like Nanu Palak Smrut Samiti, Sanvidnya Trust, and the Wadra sanstians, among others, also provide a place to stay to cancer patients.”

The Parel dharoharshala will be set up with the help of the Shapoorji Palanji Group’s CSR programme, according to Dr Banavali.