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Second chance for cancer patients

By Sulochana Ramiah Mohan

For patients with end-stage liver disease and acute blood cancers can now have a second-chance in life, say two world-renowned doctors from Singapore.

Two outstanding doctors in the field of transplanting Dr. Desmond Wai, Consultant Transplant Hepatologist and Gastroenterologist of Asian Centre for Liver Diseases and Transplantation, Singapore and Dr. Patrick Tan, Medical Director of the Haematopoietic Stem Cell Transplant Programme and the Haematology Services at the Mount Elizabeth Hospital, Singapore, were here on a short visit to attend the scientific session of Sri Lanka College of Physicians organised by Parkway Group Healthcare Pte Ltd. (Singapore), an information centre in Sri Lanka for East Shore Hospital, Gleneagles Hospital and Mount Elizabeth Hospital (Singapore) to talk on the major breakthrough in the field of medicine.

Talking about their fields respectively, Dr. Wai explained how liver transplantation could be a lifesaving treatment that restored liver function and offered them a new lease of life, but also stressed on the critical shortage of donor livers, and that many patients on the waiting list died before a suitable cadaveric donor liver was found.

In recognition of this pressing problem and the increasing incidence of liver diseases in Asia today, Gleneagles Hospital launched the Living Donor Liver Transplant (LDLT) programme in April 2002. It became the only hospital in Singapore to be allowed to perform this highly complex procedure. The LDLT is a procedure in which a diseased liver is replaced with a segment of liver from a healthy human donor.

"Liver transplant is done on patients who suffer from three chronic liver disorders. The first is the acute failure of the liver which is also known as Hepatitis E, and patients suffering from this are very sick and confused and can die within two to three weeks," explained Dr. Wai.

"The second type of liver disorder is the liver cirrhosis, also known as Hepatitis C. Liver cirrhosis is common among people who consume high quantity of alcohol and a common disease in the Asia region. Patients who suffer from this gradually become weak and have deteriorating health. They end up vomiting blood and become bloated with water in the stomach and die in two years or less time.

The third type is Liver Cancer. In this case the liver, sometimes need to be removed totally or partly and that is where transplanting comes in as the ultimatum."

Speaking about liver donors, he explained that they are as important as the patient who suffers from the disease. A donor could be from the immediate family or emotionally attached person," he explained. "But a young person in the age of 20-25 can be an ideal person to donate part of his liver. However, we don't ask for the younger person in the family to donate, unless we have given a choice to pick the donor from among the family. In this case, a piece of healthy liver is surgically removed from a healthy living person and transplanted into a recipient, immediately after the recipient's diseased liver has been entirely removed. Liver transplantation is unique in that, the risk of chronic rejection also decreases over time, although recipients need to take immuno-suppressive medication for the rest of their lives, most of the time," he added. "We can remove 30%- 60% of a healthy liver to be transplanted and the donor will have his liver back to its normal size, because the liver would grow to its original size in two months.

The Liver Transplant Programme comprises a team of highly experienced and dedicated doctors who, during the surgery, team up to two with six doctors each, care and observe the patient and the donor's condition as well.

Dr. Wai has treated a lawyer, the only patient from Sri Lanka so far, who paid his courteous visit to show how perfectly alright he is and the Dr. Wai shared his happiness of meeting his patient with the media, who were present at the briefing.

Dr. Wai has his education and training in many outstanding universities like National University of Singapore, Royal College of Physicians UK, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor US. He is also a member of Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh and Gastroenterology Society, Singapore.