

COMMENT

## Deaths by Trial

HOW DRUG MULTINATIONALS PUSH unnecessary drugs with exorbitant price tag is now an open secret. But how they conduct clinical test on human beings with least regard for moral values and ethics while refusing to adequately compensate the human guinea-pigs they hire, in violation of laws of the land which are, however, not so stringent in India, doesn't get much attention.

'An investigation by India's health ministry has found that drugmakers running clinical trials in the country have not compensated survivors of most volunteers who died during their studies. Of 671 deaths that were reported last year, there is evidence that compensation was given in just three cases'.

And so, the health ministry has asked 44 drugmakers to explain why they have not provided compensation, which is mandatory under the current law. Among those queried were Eli Lilly, Novartis, Pfizer, Bayer, Merck, Johnson & Johnson and Sanofi-Aventis. For instance, data compiled by the ministry show there were 152 deaths reported during Sanofi trials and 138 took place in Bayer trials.

Novartis however, defended its practice by insisting that many deaths were not caused by a medication, but instead due to the progression of underlying diseases. And compensation is not required in such cases. Other drugmakers offered a similar argument. Ministry officials also say that most deaths, which were attributed to cancer or cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disorders, seemed to have occurred due to the advanced stage of illness among volunteers.

However, there were 26 deaths that went unexplained. These occurred during trials run for or by Lilly, Amgen, Bayer, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Boehringer Ingelheim, Sanofi and Pfizer. Quintiles, the contract research organization, was also on the list. And some members of the Committee on Government Assurances, which conducted the probe, are not satisfied with the explanations provided.

"Of the 671 deaths they (ministry) have mentioned, 26 are directly related to the administration of the experimental medicine. But they are not sure about the other cases as they use terms like 'could be' and 'may be', instead of outright rejection. They need to be more specific."

The committee began its probe because the ministry did not have records on the number of deaths and the socioeconomic status of the clinical trial subjects who died. According to Maneka Gandhi, a member of Parliament from Bharatiya Janata Party, the growing number of clinical trial deaths—137 deaths registered in 2007, 288 in 2008 and 637 in 2009—prompted the review.

Surprisingly left parties do not find any reason to agitate over such issues as clinical trial deaths. What matters in their calculation is election. Anything that can fetch vote features on their agenda. Fight against multinationals cannot be carried out in isolation. It must be taken in its entirety. POSCO is not the only multinational that is devastating environment and the poor of India. Nor is Vedanta the last menace threatening hills, forests and tribals who are their natural guardians. These pharmaceutical giants are notorious in fleecing Indians by

making life-saving drugs virtually out of reach to the needy while ignoring clinical trial deaths  
defying laws. □□□ *[contributed]*