

## Cough Syrup Poisoning

### Why in News?

Due to a poisoned cough syrup, 12 children died in Jammu and more are fighting for their life in a hospital.

### Why these deaths had occurred?

- The doctors attributed the deaths to the presence of **diethylene glycol** in the cough syrup which was consumed by all the dead children.
- Diethylene glycol is an anti-freezing agent used in medicines.
- But, it causes acute renal failure in the human body followed by paralysis, breathing difficulties and ultimately death.

### Is this the first time such a poisoning has occurred?

- This is the fourth mass glycol poisoning event in India that has been caused due to a pharmaceutical drug.
- This kind of poisoning had occurred in Chennai (1973), Mumbai (1986) and New Delhi (1998).
- In all these three cases, the manufacturers of the suspect syrup failed to contain the level of glycol in the syrup due to negligence or human error.

### What should be the immediate concern?

- The immediate concern for doctors, pharmacists and the drug regulators should be **to prevent any more deaths**.
- For this, all the poisoned syrup that has ever been sold in the Indian market should be accounted and stopped from reaching the patients.
- Any patient who has consumed even a spoon of the syrup should then immediately be referred to a hospital for treatment.

### What public health measures were taken?

- When the US faced a similar poisoning situation, its entire field force of inspectors and chemists were tracking down every single drug bottle.
- This effort was accompanied by publicity blitz over radio and television.
- There are no such public health measures undertaken here.
- The Himachal Pradesh authorities who are responsible for oversight of this

syrup manufacturer have made statements that they've ordered the withdrawal of the drug which is sold across the country.

- However, there is no transparency in this recall process.
- There is no public announcement by the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI).
- [DCGI - Responsible for overall regulation of the entire Indian market.]
- The DCGI website, which is supposed to communicate drug alerts and product recalls, has no mention of suspect product as being dangerous.

### **What is the need for a recall policy?**

- Unlike other countries, India has **no binding guidelines or rules on recalling** dangerous drugs from the market.
- This is one of the key reasons why the DCGI and state drug authorities have been so sloppy.
- The 59th report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health as well as the WHO (in its national regulatory assessment) had warned the DCGI on the lack of a national recall framework in India.
- A set of recall guidelines was drafted in 2012 but never notified into law.

### **What should be done?**

- A **national recall** of the adulterated medicine is the immediate need.
- The administration needs to quickly identify which other pharmaceutical companies have received this spurious ingredient by the same trader.
- It is important for regulatory enforcement to raid and seize the records of this trader in question and verify the sales.
- The lackadaisical response of drug regulators in India is the result of a larger lethargy and arrogance of the administrative bureaucracy.
- They are the ones who are responsible for ensuring safety by keeping unethical practices of pharmaceutical companies under control.
- **National level binding guidelines** or rules on recalling dangerous drugs from the market should be notified soon.

**Source: The Hindu**