

Supreme Court Takes Serum Producing Companies to Task

A good deal of judicial intervention in the affairs of research labs in recent years came after Col. O.P Tahlan, who retired after spending 23 years of his professional life as a veterinary doctor with the Animal Transport Unit of the Indian Army, brought the Court's notice through a petition filed on December 6, 2001 that when the Army horses become unutilisable due to old age, disease or remount case, the Indian Army gives them away free of cost to serum manufacturing companies for the production of vaccines. Thereafter, the Army does not bother to keep track of the fate of the animals even though it is known that they are subjected to gross abuse by serum making

companies. These companies repeatedly infect antigens in excessively high doses than are needed for getting the required amount of antibodies. This endangers the very life of the animal and subjects it to acute and needless suffering.

Upon hearing the counsels for the parties, the Supreme Court directed CPCSEA to carry out inspections of serum producing companies within two weeks of the order. After going through the CPCSEA report on January 18, 2001, the Supreme Court found enough grounds to issue notice to VINS Bio-products, Central Research Institute, Kasauli, Bengal Chemical, Kolkata and Haffkines Bio-Pharmaceutical Corporation of Pune to show cause why they should not be directed to discontinue production of vaccine /serum in view of the adverse report of CPCSEA.

Col. Tehlan pointed out that as per WHO norms, the haemoglobin content in the blood sample of the animals used for these experiments should be 11 grams per cent. However, the inspection report of Dr. Jamkhedkar, a CPCSEA appointed

expert showed that the equines had a haemoglobin content between 6.40 grams per cent to 2.61 gram per cent.

As per the norms recommended by the World Health Organisation only young animals in the age group of 5-8 years should be used and only 10 per cent of the total blood should be taken out at a time and further blood should be taken out only once the earlier blood is fully replaced.

An animal has 8 per cent - 8.5 per cent blood on its total weight, that is, if the animal is 500 kg of weight, the amount of blood would be 35 to 40 litres. As per the inspection report, the inspected institution was found to be taking out 40 to 50 per cent of the blood available in the

body of the animal. Since the horses in question were old animals, their capacity to replace blood is also slower which is ignored by these institutions. Moreover, these institutions routinely take out blood before the replacement takes place which causes acute distress to these already weak animals leading to premature death. Due to the high doses of toxin injected into the animals, the liver also gets affected which becomes yet another cause of premature deaths.

Young horses when inoculated at the shoulder with snake venom or tetanus germs produce antibodies in their blood to fight these fatal inputs quickly and can be bled for these antibodies without having to be repeatedly inoculated with the danger of abscess forming on the shoulder, and carrying the infection into the horses blood. But the old horses being used for bleeding in these institutions were found to be in a pitiable condition with open wounds, abscesses and other horrible inflictions.

The rules demand that serum-producing institutions should acquire animals from specialised establishments for breeding animals. Even for acquiring an animal for conducting any experiment, such institutions have to obtain permission from the Ethics Committee. Col Tahlan argued that these companies were being so short sighted in profit seeking that they failed to even maintain elementary records about the health of animals or their bleeding frequency. Thus by their callous disregard, they were endangering the lives of human beings and violating their right to safe and effective medicines. Therefore, he pleaded that the Army be asked to stop supplying old horses to such companies who should be required to amend their practices with effective monitoring. The case is still pending in Court but some improvements have already come about as a result of CPCSEA inspections ordered by the Court. (See pp. 23-24) □



Haffkine Biopharmaceuticals, Pune : a big, neglected wound on the neck of the animal due to the use of thick needle for bleeding. No treatment given to animals.



A sick mule with an untreated bleeding wound near the eye. It was used for production of anti snake serum even in this diseased condition.