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Cairo seminar discusses new thalassemia therapies

Dr Amal el-Beshlawy

Dr Mervat Mattar

A SYMPOSIUM on thalassemia was held in Cairo recently to discuss new therapies to help reduce the patient's suffering, as well as the application of preventive measures for Egypt, where the disease has a high prevalence rate. The symposium was organised by the Ministry of Health and one of the pharmaceutical companies in Egypt.

Dr Sherif Amin, Head of Oncology at the Novartis Company in Egypt and Libya, said that the symposium tackled the possibility of forming an integrated medical team comprising doctors, pharmacists, nursing staff and blood banks to care for thalassemia sufferers.

The symposium stressed that thousands of patients need medical and psychological support. The help of haematology professors at Cairo, Ain Shams and Alexandria universities and the Egyptian Thalassemia Association was also essential. People with the disease needed to have access to top quality treatments to enable them to live a normal life.

Thalassemia is a type of anaemia that has a large genetic component. There is a 25-per cent chance of giving birth to a child with the disease if both the father and mother are carriers of the disease. There is a nine per cent prevalence of disease carriers in Egypt.

"Thalassemia patients require regular blood transfusions to replenish red blood cells that have been destroyed and to maintain acceptable levels of blood haemoglobin. But this may lead to other health complications," Dr Amal el-Beshlawy, Professor of Haematology and Paediatrics at Cairo University, said.

Dr Mervat Mattar, Professor of Haematology, Cairo University, said that thalassemia may also affect physical development and fertility in men. Women may suffer from a delay in the onset of menstruation, in addition to the disease's effect on the endocrine system.

"The regular blood transfusions required by thalassemia patients lead to an iron accumulation in their bodies, with each blood bag containing around 200g of iron.

This is too much for the body to benefit from and may lead to complications," Dr Mattar said. She praised the shift from iron chelation injections to tablets which have reduced the patient's suffering.

Dr Mona Hamdy, Professor of Haematology and Paediatrics at Cairo University, announced that the Specialist Medical Councils had recently amended state-paid treatment codes for thalassemia to help provide patients with the best possible therapies in the light of recent price increases.

She stressed the importance of establishing thalassemia treatment centres nationwide. Their mission would not only be to prescribe medication, but also to guide patients on how to follow the treatment regimen with the support of doctors.

She also called for the inclusion of thalassemia information in high school curricula, similar to that in other nations, to ensure an early awareness of the disease and its causes.