



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Local pharma lights up hope in cancer treatment

Bangladesh has achieved tremendous improvement in cancer treatment and anti-cancer drug manufacturing, said Golam Mohiuddin Faruque, president of Bangladesh Cancer Society

The pharmaceutical sector of Bangladesh has achieved many milestones over the past 14 years. Not only do local companies now meet 90 percent of the country's demand for medicines, but the products are also exported to around 150 countries, fetching hundreds of millions of dollars.

However, among the most significant strides the sector has made is its advancement in the manufacture of life-saving cancer medication.

In the last 14 years, pharmaceutical companies like Beacon, Eskayef, Renata, Incepta, Healthcare, and Techno Pharma produced more than 110 varieties of oncological drugs.

Around 17 local companies are manufacturing anti-cancer drug products. Thanks to their bold initiatives, patients in Bangladesh can now access cancer drugs at affordable prices, which have brought down the cost of treatment.

Monjural Alam, chief executive officer of Beacon Medicare, said the prices of such drugs in Europe and the US are beyond the purchasing capacity of many patients.

cost of medicines. Today, it not only meets domestic consumption but also serves as an exporter in the global market.

"This achievement was made possible by the dedication of local pharmaceutical companies and the trust placed by doctors and patients in local products," Alam said.

According to manufacturers, local companies produce around 99 percent of oncology drugs, yet some patients still resort to imported drugs or unofficial imports.

Recently, pharmaceutical companies have been affected immensely due to the supply chain disruptions and the dollar crisis against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war. The situation is improving following the collaborative efforts of the government and drug manufacturers.

It provides medicines worth Tk 3 crore to poor patients annually.

Beacon plans to establish a second oncology plant to meet the increasing global demand for cancer drugs. The company is also considering setting up a palliative care centre to alleviate the suffering of patients.

A relative newcomer to the scene is Eskayef Oncology, which commenced its journey in



"There is a scarcity of life-saving drugs worldwide. When the drugs are available, they are usually beyond the reach of common people. To this end, we have established a facility within our company to serve global patients," he said.

Before 2009, there was scepticism regarding Beacon's ability to manufacture sophisticated cancer drugs. However, the plant has become successful, and patients can buy life-saving drugs at reasonable prices.

Claiming that Beacon pioneered the manufacturing of cancer drugs in Bangladesh, he said it now meets around half of the local demand for cancer drugs.

Before 2010, Bangladesh relied entirely on imports for oncology drugs. This means only patients from financially solvent families could afford cancer treatment due to the exorbitant

2018. However, the company, which boasts advanced technologies, has expanded its footprint beyond Bangladesh in no time.

It is one of the few Asian companies to have secured approval from the European Union Good Manufacturing Practice (EU GMP) to produce anti-cancer medicines. This is recognised by 27 nations of the EU and is considered a passport for entry into the global market.

"This recognition facilitated the entry of our drugs into the EU market and various other countries," said Mohammad Mujahidul Islam, executive director (marketing and sales) of Eskayef.

Eskayef is currently exporting products to over 60 countries.

"Thanks to modern technologies, facilities,

and unwavering dedication, Eskayef Oncology is committed to delivering affordable and globally standard anti-cancer products to patients both at home and abroad," he said.

Prof Golam Mohiuddin Faruque, president of the Bangladesh Cancer Society, said Bangladesh has achieved tremendous improvement in cancer treatment and anti-cancer drug manufacturing.

Bangladesh exported cancer drugs worth Tk 1,000 crore in 2023. The amount was around Tk 500 crore in 2019. Local sales of cancer drugs have reached Tk 800 crore to Tk 1,000 crore as demand is increasing by an average of 15 percent each year, according to the manufacturers.

Prof SM Abdur Rahman, chairman of the pharmacy department at the University of Dhaka, said Bangladesh's pharmaceutical companies have set up world-class manufacturing plants equipped with sophisticated machinery, enabling them to produce top-class drugs.

He thinks there is no doubt that Bangladesh's oncology products will dominate the world market, meeting global standards, quality, and cost-effectiveness.

There are areas of concern.

After 2026, when Bangladesh graduates from the group of least-developed countries, local pharmaceutical companies will have to follow patent guidelines while manufacturing drugs, including oncology products. If medicines are produced following the patent rights, the drugs will be costlier in the local market.

To avert the situation, Bangladesh initially tried to extend its Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) waiver by six to nine years and then up to January 1, 2033. However, at the 12th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Geneva in June 2022, global leaders did not extend the TRIPS deadline for graduating LDCs.

Under the current agreement, drug makers in LDCs can produce any generic medicine without having to follow patent guidelines until January 1, 2033. But the benefit is not applicable to graduating LDCs such as Bangladesh.

Beacon's Alam, however, said it would be applicable for only new molecules, which comprise few drugs. "So, the pharmaceuticals sector will not face significant challenges after graduation."

Full-fledged cancer treatment facilities need of the hour

JAGARAN CHAKMA

High-quality cancer drugs are produced in Bangladesh. Oncologists and physicians are also available. However, the country is lagging in putting in place an adequate number of full-fledged facilities to treat patients suffering from such diseases.

The missing link exists although cancer patients are on the rise in Bangladesh in line with global trends and hospitals and clinics have flourished.

Cancer is already a leading cause of death worldwide, accounting for nearly 10 million deaths in 2020, or nearly one in six deaths. The most common cancers are breast, lung, colon, rectum and prostate cancers, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Cancer cases are expected to rise 77 percent by the middle of the century, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a specialised branch of the WHO, said in February, highlighting the growing burden of the disease.

There are predicted to be more than 35 million cancer cases during 2050, up from the estimated 20 million in 2022, the agency said.

The increase reflects both population ageing and growth, as well as changes to people's exposure to risk factors. Tobacco, alcohol and obesity are key factors, along with air pollution.

Currently, Bangladesh has 13 lakh to 15 lakh cancer patients, while around two lakh new patients are diagnosed with the diseases each year, figures from the National Center for Biotechnology Information showed.

There are around 240 oncologists in Bangladesh. Treatment is available in 19 hospitals, and 465 beds have been set aside for chemotherapy at the oncology and radiotherapy departments.

"There is no shortage of oncology surgeons or specialists in Bangladesh," said Prof Golam Mohiuddin Faruque, president of the Bangladesh Cancer Society.

Besides, locally manufactured generic versions of oncology drugs are similar to the products made by multinational companies in terms of quality.

"However, there is a lack of radiation therapy facilities at hospitals as it is very expensive," he said, adding that it costs around Tk 40 crore to set up such units.

Currently, 40 radiotherapy facilities, including those at government hospitals, are available against the need for 300, Faruque said. Private hospitals treat 67 percent of cancer patients while the rest receive services from state-run hospitals.

According to Faruque, patients could see an oncologist for only Tk 10 at a government hospital or for Tk 1,000 to Tk 1,500 at a private hospital.

Drugs have also become easily available during the last decade as pharmaceutical companies have taken initiatives to manufacture oncology products. "As a result, the cost of treatment has come down by two-thirds during the decade," Faruque said.

Since the number of cancer patients is rising, the government is building treatment facilities in eight divisional hospitals, which may be commissioned next year.

Training general physicians on cancer warning signs and setting up early detection centres at medical colleges and the district level are underway. Piloting of cervical cancer vaccination has recently been completed.

The International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr), BRAC, Ahsania Mission Cancer Hospital, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Bangladesh Cancer Society, ASHIC Foundation, Amader Gram, AK Khan Healthcare Trust, and Chattogram-based Cancer Support Society (Cansup) run programmes for early detection.

Bangladesh has agreed to reduce premature mortality from cancer as part of the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Industry people say improving the cancer treatment scenario overnight is not an easy task. However, policymakers should show their interest in expanding the facilities and pushing the agenda forward since cancer diseases have huge health and financial impacts.

