

## Consulting room ●●●●

## In sight of cure

Dr Debraj Shome



Ocular oncology is a newly-emerging field in ophthalmology which includes detection and treatment of eye cancer; the orbit (bony socket encasing the eye), eyelids and the surrounding face. Treatment for these cancers

has to be a delicate balance between destroying the tumour and preserving vision. Very few centres in India offer holistic treatment for these cancers.

One of the most common eye cancers is retinoblastoma, which occurs in children aged one to five years. Its incidence is about 1 in 15,000 to 1 in 18,000 live births. Its occurrence peaks in the first year of life and declines with age. India can expect 1,000-1,500 new cases of retinoblastoma every year; this is around a third of the cases worldwide. There is no race or gender predisposition to retinoblastoma, and both eyes are affected equally. However, heredity does increase chances of contracting the disease.

The tumour starts in the retina and, in later stages, spreads to the entire eye, orbital structures, brain, and other organs. If detected at an early stage, this tumour may be completely cured — with chemotherapy and laser treatment — with vision preserved. In the intermediate and final stages, it may result in loss of the eye or even death. The primary goal is to safeguard the child's life. Salvaging the eye and vision are secondary and tertiary goals.

Prior to this century, retinoblastoma was a uniformly fatal disease. Improvement in diagnostic and treatment modalities, greater social awareness and earlier patient diagnosis have improved prognosis with survival rates currently exceeding 90 per cent in most industrialised countries.

In India, the problems are lack of awareness, misdiagnosis and inadequate treatment facilities. The cancer is detected only in the advanced stages in 75 per cent of the cases while almost 60 per cent have orbital disease. As a result, over 65-70 per cent of patients need to have their eye removed and 20 per cent of patients with orbital disease die. Lack of awareness among general practitioners and general ophthalmologists compounds difficulty in early diagnosis.

Eye cancers, especially in children, display few or no symptoms initially, so public awareness and regular eye check-ups are essential to detect the disease. Parents should seek expert opinion in cases of white pupillary reflex, protrusion of the eye, and squinting and redness of the child's eye.

It is important to remember that retinoblastoma is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to eye cancers.

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