

Stem cell therapy shows light of day to US medico

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Chennai: In February, Shailesh (name changed), a 22-year-old medical student in the US lost his eyesight after swallowing methanol, a toxic alcohol. Doctors there told him that his blindness was irreversible. After stem cell therapy in India, Shailesh will soon fly back to the US to, literally, see his doctors.

He is today able to read and recognise colours. Once back in the US, doctors there will monitor his progress. "I am sure they will be surprised," he said. In his medical reports, doctors had said that he had no chance of regaining vision with or without treatment as his optic nerve had suffered irreversible damage.

Stem cell therapy is still part of clinical trials for ocular diseases in the US, but is not yet

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recommended as a treatment. In India, therapeutic experiments are less restrictive.

On February 24, Shailesh came to Chennai for treatment. He met stem cell therapist Dr Himanshu Bansal of the Institute of Spinal Injury and Stem Cell Research, Rudrapur, and Laksha Hospital in Chennai. The Indian Council of Medical Research has allowed some hospitals to conduct stem cell research.

Doctors injected 120ml of stem cells near the patient's optic nerve. These cells were drawn from his bone marrow. Stem cells have the ability to grow into specialised cells. After the first shot, Shailesh showed improvement, and the procedure was repeated. "These stem cells have managed to regenerate the cells in the optic nerve. He is able to read with glasses now," said Dr Bansal, who will soon present the case for peer review in a medical journal.

Senior ophthalmologists in the city said, if proven, the therapy would be a boon for patients who suffer optic nerve damage due to trauma or diabetes. "But, before being adopted as a therapy, a clinical trial on larger groups of patients should be done," said a senior ophthalmologist.