

Stem cells help youth get eyesight

DC CORRESPONDENT

CHENNAI

March 15: "When I reach the US tomorrow, I will first go to the ophthalmologist and tell her that I can see her," says 22-year-old, bespectacled Shailesh (name changed), the NRI biology student who has regained his eyesight after receiving two injections of bone marrow stem cells in his eyes at a Chennai hospital.

This is the first time in the world stem cell therapy is being used to treat methanol-induced blindness.

methanol

effect

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"Methanol is the main toxin in illicit arrack which

kills hundreds of people in India every year. As little as 10 ml can cause permanent blindness and over 30 ml, causes death," says Dr Himanshu Bansal, an Uttarakhand orthopaedic surgeon who performed the procedure at an inexpensive Chennai hospital.

After pumping the young man with steroids, experts in his hometown, Wisconsin, had written off Shailesh's case. His ophthalmologist, Dr Kara H. Harbick, has stated in her discharge report, "Patient is planning to go to India for treatment. I would not expect any improvement,

with or without intervention."

"I could not digest their underestimation of Indian doctors. I had read that stem cell therapy could be used to rejuvenate dying cell and got in touch with an Indian doctor," said Shailesh.

Dr Bansal flew down to Chennai and used technology from city stem cell bank, Lifecell. Around 120 ml of bone marrow was aspirated from Shailesh's spinal cord and, after concentrating the stem cells, injected back into his eyes. A week later, his vision slowly returned and he was tested to have 6/9 vision.