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Cipla in talks with Centre to share cancer drug know-how

28 Jun 2010, 0252 hrs IST, Khomba Singh, ET Bureau

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NEW DELHI: Pharma powerhouse Cipla has started talks with the government to share knowledge on making cancer drugs, which, if successful could radically lower the prices of a class of medicines that remain largely unaffordable. “The initial discussions are related to 10 off-patented cancer drugs,” said a person familiar with the matter, adding that the talks centred on the number of drugs and the processes involved in transferring knowledge.

It remained unclear if the talks touched upon the monetary angle, though Cipla has often repeated its willingness to share information with the government on drug technologies for free.

“Cipla is more than happy to share technological know-how of expensive anti-cancer drugs,” said chairman Dr YK Hamied. The company sells nearly 40 cancer drugs with several others in the development stage. These generic drugs are priced around one-tenth that of the original made by global pharma companies. If state-owned pharma companies, such as Hindustan Antibiotics and Karnataka Antibiotics and Pharmaceuticals, get to make cancer drugs, their prices are expected to fall further. The government could sell these medicines at its own discount chain of chemist shops, Jan Aushadhi, and at public hospitals and clinics.

The development will be music to the ears of the country’s nearly 25 lakh patients suffering from different types of cancer. Most cannot afford treatment as a month’s dosage of some of these medicines cost as much as Rs 2-3 lakh. “Only about 5% of patients can afford chemotherapy drugs. Others can’t afford the new costly drugs and have to rely on cheaper old molecules, which are less effective,” said Cancer Patients Aid Association chairperson YK Sapru.

Many cancer patients in India rely on drugs made by generic companies such as Cipla, whose lower prices in part stem from getting approvals for sale without lengthy clinical trials to show they are safe and effective.

In April, Cipla launched a copy of Bayer’s cancer medicine Nexavar at a tenth of its original price, deflating the drug’s cost to Rs 28,000 a month. The company also unveiled a version of lung cancer drug Erlotinib (Erlotinib) at a third of the price of Swiss major Roche’s Tarceva brand in 2008.