How Akshat Jain helped prevent a dengue epidemic in Rajasthan

Dr Akshat Jain, left, with patients in at a rural health center in Rajasthan.

Rajasthan had experienced unprecedented rain this year. There was a shortage of blood, and plenty of stagnant water. The conditions were ripe for an epidemic of mosquito-borne diseases like dengue and malaria — until Dr Akshat Jain and his group stepped in.

Dr Jain, an expert in pediatric hematology and oncology at the Steven and Alexandra Cohen Children Medical Center in Long Island, New York, had already been instrumental in measuring levels of lead in children and treating them through his AGNI program in collaboration with the Sawai Man Singh Medical College in Jaipur.

That work had the full backing of the health ministries at the federal — from Dr Jagdish Prasad, India’s director general of health services, and the then Indian health minister Dr Harsh Vardhan — and state level (from Rajasthan Rathod, health minister of Rajasthan, and Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia).

Dr Jain knew that in the absence of a cure or vaccine, dengue virus’s progress could be prevented by hobbling its vehicle, the mosquito, or by rehydrating victims, who will eventually fight off the disease unless they die of internal bleeding or dehydration.

His team saw that the blood banks were depleted and put out word in the local and national media — via India News, Rajasthan Patrika and ETV Rajasthan — that led to a public and private blood banks organizing blood donation drives in Bhilwara, in villages neighboring Jaipur, and within Jaipur’s Johari Bazar, Lal Kothi, Mansarovar and other areas — all areas identified as epidemiological dengue epicenters.

The group got ministers of the ruling Bharatiya Janata party and opposition Congress party on a talk show held at the Indian Medical Association Hall at the SMS Medical College, for a debate on the preparedness for the dengue epidemic.

It also highlighted the work the previous Congress party government had taken to curb dengue epidemics in the past, including house-to-house distribution of free mosquito-repellant fumigators. Local nonprofits also helped out.

Among other things, Dr Jain suggested the use of hot fluids such as ginger tea, and of coconut water (which has essential fatty acids that boost the immune system) to ensure the patient was hydrated and got enough antioxidants and electrolytes.

He also recommended the consumption of papaya leaf extract, which contains papain and chymopapain, enzymes that break down proteins on the dengue virus and thus help increase platelet count.

The message sent to print and broadcast media outlets was: ‘Everyone take care of their own households’ — that dripping water from hand-pumps be stopped, that every house have only one drain outlet, that coolers or units where water stagnated be wiped dry.

He also called for the local governments government to spray mosquito repellent in overcrowded areas, cover discarded wells with tarpaulin, and pour oil over larger water bodies to suffocate mosquito larvae.

“As we speak, there are close to new 200 patients in combined Rajasthan, Gurgaon and Delhi,” said Dr Jain, who returned to New York November 10.

Dr Jain is also the founder of Prarabdham, a nonprofit that helps send near-expiry or expired by still viable supplies to India, including cleaning alcohol, sterilized vacuum-packed syringes, lumbar puncture needles, antiseptic fluid, and the like.

Bay Area Shiv Durga temple honors elected officials

On its second anniversary December 7, the Shiv Durga temple in Santa Clara, California, honored newly elected officials.

“We know it has a religious component to it, but more importantly it’s a place for community gathering,” newly elected Saratoga City Council member Rishi Kumar told India Abroad. “The Indian-American population is growing and they need a place where they feel at home.”

He said there is no temple in Saratoga, and he would like one there.

Kumar urged the hundreds of attendees to ‘get involved’ to participate in the community, run for school boards, run for city councils, attend meetings, and be part of the system.

“If you need help, come to me,” said Kumar, who had started his campaign from the temple.

Newly elected Cupertino City Council-member Savita Vaidhyanathan echoed Kumar. ‘Please get involved in the community,’ she told the gathering. She said youth was the priority in her campaign and ‘I really, really want to encourage youth of this community to please get involved and get your voices heard.’

Krishan K Pandey, founder and president of the temple, told India Abroad he wanted to expand the temple.

“Our goal is to have a 9-foot-tall Durga idol and 5-foot-tall Shiva Linga — that would signify the nine forms of Durga as well as five elements of Shiva,” He said, “Also, we plan to set up a library where the next generation could find and read about Hindu scriptures, and Sanskrit.”

The temple also honored Sunnyvale Vice Mayor Jim Davis, Milpitas Mayor Jose Esteves, and the Santa Clara police chief.

‘I am tremendously honored because you are working in melting our culture together and that is very important and will make the community better,’ Davis said.