

# India intensifies war against Japanese encephalitis

**AARTI DHAR**

The Centre has launched a major war against Japanese encephalitis which claims hundreds of young lives and causes high morbidity among children in several States across the country during monsoon.

Within weeks of taking over, Union Health and Family welfare Minister, Dr Harsh Vardhan said that his priority would be to ensure 100 per cent immunisation against the killer disease.

Expressing extreme distress over the "runaway conquest of encephalitis," Dr Harsh Vardhan said it was high time extraordinary steps were taken to stymie it. He said the need was to immunise children against JE in the affected areas by carrying out a drive on the lines of the Pulse Polio campaign.

To ensure full vaccine coverage, Dr Harsh Vardhan has suggested involvement of all stakeholders. "We must involve the voluntary sector, Indian Medical Association, religious organisations doing social work, even school children, to ensure that all children are brought to the immunisation centres," he said in an official statement recently. He also stressed on the need for surveillance. The ultimate objective is to prevent the disease occurrence

by early diagnosis, implementation of effective control measures, and high vaccine coverage along with active surveillance, he said while promising to dedicate resources for the purpose.

Japanese encephalitis is caused by a mosquito-borne virus. Eastern India is the most-affected region by this killer disease, particularly Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Assam. However, more than 17 States are reporting cases of JE and Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES) which has high mortality and morbidity rates. Since the virus attacks the brain of the child, the chances of the child becoming mentally retarded are high.

Uttar Pradesh reports 500-600 JE deaths every year while just last month, over 100 children died of the disease in Bihar. The World Health Organisation put the JE toll at over 1,000 in 2013.

The Ministry will also seek help from the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta to deal with the annual outbreak.

All these announcements, including additional beds and ventilators at the Governmental Hospital in Gorakhpur which sees the highest number of patients, are in addition to the ambitious plan being implemented in a phased manner since last year.