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Delhi Times

HBO therapy: A breathtaking breakthrough?

Aasheesh Sharma

It's emerged as one of the more popular ways to 'arrest aging' in the West. In fact, the proponents of hyperbaric oxygen (HBO) and the messiahs of alternative healing couldn't have found a better idol than Wacko Jacko to showcase it to the world. That the secret of Michael Jackson's youthful countenance is an HBO chamber at home, is old hat. That the dead dude can also breathe in 100 per cent oxygen at pressure greater than the atmospheric level, courtesy the hyperbaric treatment centre at Apollo Hospital, is news.

Hyperbaric oxygen treatment goes beyond the use of the life-saving gas for cosmetic purposes. Unlike oxygen bars, which offer some minutes of 'pure' breathing to those desirous of prolonged youth, HBO treatment is carried out in chambers which deliver concentrated oxygen to tissues at hyper levels. "The therapy can prove to be a god-send for accident victims—it could have saved the couple which succumbed to carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning in a car recently. HBO treatment infuses oxygen to areas of the body where blood vessels have been blocked, especially after burn

injuries and fractures. An infusion of oxygen at high pressure sends it to the plasma, instead of the RBC, opening a path for circulation," explains Tarun Sahni, senior consultant (medicine and hyperbaric oxygen), Apollo Hospital.

HBO therapy gave a new lease of life to Joy Singh, a housewife, whose car went down an incline while driving in Shillong. "After undergoing hyperbaric therapy in Scotland for four months, not only did I get my mobility back, I also regained my memory," she says. "Today, the common man need not cross the seven seas or face huge hospital bills to avail of this therapy."

"Depending on the severity of the problem, costs to patients will vary between Rs 1,500-2,800 per exposure. In fact, the cost comes down as the dosage of oxygen decreases," explains Vikram



Sharma of Aashlok Hospital.

But not everybody is gung-ho about HBO's revolutionary healing abilities. "Its usefulness has been scientifically proven only for three conditions: decompression sickness, severe CO poisoning and arterial gas embolism. In all other cases, HBO therapy, at best, can be an adjunct to the main treatment. Then, HBO's ability to arrest the aging process has never been proven scientifically," says Randeep Guleria, associate professor of medicine, AIIMS. Also, the fact that HBO can not be used as a stand-alone therapy casts a shadow over its cost-effectiveness. "Though I have used HBO therapy to treat patients experiencing a sudden onset of sensory-neural deafness, one has to be selective. If not done with discretion, the use of 100 per cent oxygen can induce

adverse effects on the lungs and heart," reasons A S Bais, deputy director general (health), government of India.

However, HBO can sometimes prove to be a life saver, says Air Commodore Ranjit Kumar, director, medical services (Air Force). "People can be pulled out of life-threatening conditions such as CO poisoning, gas gangrene and injuries to diabetics. In such cases, if the patient is rushed to an oxygen chamber, the chances of survival multiply," he offers. While HBO chambers come as a breath of life-saving air, the developments in medical science never cease to take one's breath away!