

Cipla doyen sees opportunity to tackle Covid-19 like they did HIV

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It's yesterday once more for Cipla doyen Dr YK Hamied, as the medicines being evaluated for their possible impact on the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) are all available with the Mumbai-based drugmaker.

“We are in a position that we were 20 years ago with HIV. We are in a lucky position that you've got these drugs. I've got Antiflu (oseltamivir), Lopimune (lopinavir-ritonavir), Azee (azithromycin), Imulast (hydroxychloroquine). And I'm going to have Favipiravir soon,” Dr Hamied told *BusinessLine*, on the buzz around these drugs in healthcare circles.

The HIV experience he harks back to, is when Cipla slashed the price of HIV/AIDS drugs in Africa (2001) to less than a dollar a day, breaking a Big Pharma stranglehold.

As the coronavirus now takes a large toll across countries, the scientific community have been watching with optimism, the action of anti-viral Oseltamivir, anti-retroviral (ARV- for HIV/AIDS medicines) Lopinavir and Ritonavir and anti-malarial drugs chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine. Indian doctors in Jaipur recently claimed good outcomes from using a combination of some of these drugs in Covid-affected people. And on Thursday, US President Donald Trump said, the malarial drugs could be potential “game-changers”, only to have this observation tempered with caution by the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA). All this nevertheless resulted in heightened interest in companies making these drugs.

Addressing this optimism, Dr Hamied said, “As I see it, if 100 people get coronavirus, 80 per cent recover easily. The first stage, use Antiflu and paracetamol, 80 per cent recover because it is a simple flu. In about 15 per cent, it does not recede or they don’t recover. The anti-retrovirals, certainly help (here). Lopimune should be given in conjunction with Oseltamivir.” Recent studies also say that hydroxychloroquine and Azithromycin have good

outcomes. Dr Hamied quips, “Luckily Cipla has both these drugs.”

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In the stage of infection where people undergoing treatment don't recover and get a severe lung infection, he pointed to Roche's Actemra that reportedly has an approval in China. “Cipla are the sole agents of Roche for this product in India. So all the products that I have mentioned so far, Cipla does,” he said.

Scale-up

“My problem is, suppose coronavirus gets out of hand, how do we cope? I can only make a particular amount. I can't make for a million patients. But 5,000, 10,000 patients we can cope,” he said, adding that help would be needed to scale up.

Dr Hamied said they have given medicines to Government authorities and the World Health Organization and offered to work with anyone who needed it. Cipla has a

partnership with the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research-Indian Institute of Chemical Technology on the scale up of antiviral compounds Favipiravir, Remdesivir and Baloxavir. This partnership is an Indian project and can herald more such, he said.

As a “nationalist”, Dr Hamied is vocal to do again, “exactly like we did 20 years ago for Africa.” He has been getting requests from overseas, he said, particularly from Africa, saying “Don’t starve us of medicine.”

In contrast, the Indian pharma industry, some of whose representatives also make the anti-viral, ARV and malarial drugs, have largely been silent. Possibly waiting for greater clarity on the definitive role of these drugs in tackling the virus.

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