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Life-saving drug vanishes after govt introduces price control

9 September 2014, New Delhi, Dhirendra Kumar

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The decision of the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) to control the price of life saving drugs has led to its disappearance from the retail market. In a reality test conducted by *Millennium Post* over the shortage of drugs, it has come to light that Albumin, which is administered intravenously to patients in critical care situations in hospitals, is not available on the shelves of retail shops across the country.

When *Millennium Post* contacted distributors and retailers, they revealed that the scarcity of Albumin started after the prices of 50ml and 100 ml Albumin vials were slashed from Rs 4,000-Rs 6,500 to Rs 1,600-Rs 2,500.

Apart from Mukesh Ambani-owned Reliance Life Sciences and Hemarus, there are six major suppliers of Albumin, including American origin firms Baxter and Biocon, but the products of all these suppliers are not visible in the 'open' market.

Shashi Bhushan Tiwari, who is running from pillar to post to get a dose of Albumin said, 'My brother AK Tiwari, who is suffering from Liver Cirrhosis, is admitted in All India Institute of Medical Sciences, but I'm not able to get an unit of Albumin. The AIIMS authorities told me to get the life saving drug from the market, but it's not available in medical stores. My brother's condition is critical and he needs three more units of Albumin, apart from the one, which I had purchased at Rs 4,000.'

Speaking on the issue, a senior NPPA official said, 'We cannot comment on the matter since we do not have a system in place to monitor the availability of the product in the market. If information comes to us through media or we get specific complaints, the government will definitely take manufactures/suppliers to task.'

The official further said, 'The government is open to revise the rates in public interest, in case a particular drug 'evaporates' from market after fixation of ceiling price.'

Blaming Reliance Life for creating paucity of Albumin, Yogendra Sharma, a drug manufacturer, alleged, 'The shortage of this drug started after NPPA passed an order making it mandatory capping prices of 108 formulation packs of 50 non-scheduled drugs in the anti-diabetic and cardiovascular segments, under Paragraph 19 of the Drugs (Prices Control) Order, 2013.'

'Since Reliance is a major player and wants to do business on its own terms, they are exporting rather than meeting the needs of domestic market, Sharma alleged.

Reliance Life Sciences spokesperson too admitted there's shortage of the drug in the market, but refused to give any substantial reason for it. In an email reply to *Millennium Post*, Reliance said, 'There is a constraint in availability of Albumin in India because out of the six suppliers, three suppliers have not been participating in the Indian market, for reasons not known to us.' Reliance spokesperson maintained that the firm was supplying Albumin at usual level, even after the price control that came into effect from June 2013.