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INDIA: Uranium deforms kids in Faridkot

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Doctors Baffled As There's No Apparent Source Of The Toxic Metal In Punjab

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Faridkot: Big heads, bulging eyes, twisted hands that don't reach their mouths and bent legs that can barely support their frail frames. Intrigued by these abnormalities among children in a pocket of Faridkot, visiting South African toxicologist Dr Carin Smit had their hair samples sent to a German laboratory. The results, which have just come in, are shocking: the deformities were caused by alarmingly high levels of uranium.

"The test results have left us baffled as there's no apparent source of uranium in Punjab," said Prithpal Singh, head of Baba Farid Centre for Special Children in Faridkot. More tests are now being organized among the 150 affected children with the help of a team of German and South African doctors to establish whether the traces found are from depleted uranium or natural sources.

Dr Smit, a clinical metal toxicologist from Johannesburg who is here to collect more samples of children's hair and urine, said, *"When I first saw such overwhelming evidence of severe brain damage, I thought it was poisoning. I never suspected uranium."*

It was Smit's liaison with a laboratory in Germany which specializes in toxicology that made the first tests possible. Now she, along with Vera Dirr, another specialist from Johannesburg, are here to collect urine samples. "Of the 149 children tested, 53 are likely to show more traces of uranium. We are now focusing on them to get more specific evidence", Smit said. Since uranium severely harms the kidneys and liver, 53 kids are being tested for physical degeneration.

Punjab health authorities, however, washed their hands of the issue. "This isn't a health subject. We don't know how children are showing such high concentration of uranium. Since it's a global problem, it's for the Centre to deal with it," said Punjab health minister Laxmi Kanta Chawla.

The affected children lead severely restricted lives, unable to communicate or carry out normal daily activities. *"If they get hurt or are bitten by, say, ants, they don't feel the pain,"* said Dr Prithpal.

Yuvraj Singh, 7, has no control over his body. He can barely stand, eat or speak. "He's my only child. It's agonizing to watch him make futile attempts to reach out for things," says Davinder Singh, a farmer from Mallan Wala village about 60 km from Faridkot.

Rajni, mother of 13-year-old Sarika, starts weeping when she speaks about her child. Sarika can't hold her head up as it keeps falling sideways and it's a daily struggle for her to eat. For most parents living in anxiety, the arrival of foreign doctors brought a flicker of hope. "We desperately hope that the treatment will help my four-year-old grandson stand on his feet," said Paramvir Singh from Korakpura, a village 35km from Faridkot.

Experts say the government must step in. "Of course, it's a health issue as it deals with the damaging impact of heavy metals on people. This is a subject of serious research and we need financial support for

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scientific studies," said Pratibha Singhvi, professor of paediatric neurology at PGI, Chandigarh.

Article View: HORROR STORY: *The affected children lead severely restricted lives, unable to communicate or carry out daily activities*

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