

## LIVER TRANSPLANT CENTRE

RUBIN SINGH  
**LAUDABLE: Lance Naik Singh (left front) with other liver transplant recipients**



# Military Operation

The army's first nation-wide organ retrieval drive gives soldiers and civilians a new lease of life

■ By Sandeep Unnithan

In January, Brigadier Y.P. Bakshi was shot dead by unknown assailants in Meerut. Poignantly, his death has given new hope to five strangers. After the consent of his family, the war veteran's liver was transplanted into a terminally ill 14-year-old, his kidneys were transplanted to two soldiers, eyes were received by another and heart valve was given to a one-year-old infant. "I'm back from the jaws of death," says Lance Naik Sukhvinder Singh, who was bed-ridden two years ago.

This is just one of the miracles wrought by the two-year old Army Organ and Retrieval Transplantation Organisation (AORTA). Operating from Delhi's Army Hospital (Research & Referral)—the hub of 140 military hospitals—AORTA aims at giving new life to not just army personnel, but civilians as well. It is the first nation-wide organ retrieval effort and clearly a tough task because even doctors are not adequately sensitised to organ donation.

The gap between demand and supply is enormous. Over three lakh people die in India every year because they do not get liver for transplants. The number of brain-dead cases as a result of brain injuries and strokes—the only condition in which organs can be removed—is even harder to come by.



Hospital authorities estimate that nearly 30 per cent of all neurological cases result in brain deaths—this is when the heart beats for 48 hours, but it allows the removal of organs.

"Organs are a national resource and should not be wasted," says Colonel A.K. Seth, director, AORTA, underlining the criticality of the mission.

It takes 72 hours for the completion of the whole process—from the time a family gives the go-ahead to the actual transplant and three surgeries (on the donor, the organ and the recipient)—involving over 100 personnel.

Organs cannot be stored and have to be transplanted within 12 hours. Helping them are specially-trained patient aid and liaison officers who are in contact with the family at every stage of the operation. So far, nine out of 20 brain-dead cases here have led to organ transplants. The most heartening was the case of Major Sidharth Malik who donated the organs of his 18-month-old son, Shaurya, after he fell from a balcony and died. His eyes gave sight to two personnel, while his kidneys saved the life of a 31-year-old man.

"We plan to replicate the model generated at our hospital at eight other major army hospitals," says Major General O.P. Mathew, commandant of the hospital. AORTA has so far got pledges from only 1,000 personnel—a pointer to the daunting task before a million-strong organisation. ■