

Eshan Kalyanikar speaks to Dr PA Abhinand who hopes to continue teaching despite a debilitating condition called SMA

# Prof's shot at survival

After 31 years of living with Spinal Muscular Atrophy, a rare disorder, Dr PA Abhinand, a professor of Bioinformatics at the Sri Ramachandra Institute of Higher Education and Research (SRIHER) in Chennai, sees a ray of hope in a drug that India approved only in July this year. However, the cost of this life-long treatment is ₹72 lakh per year. In the current health-policy paradigm, the only way for Abhinand to access this is through fundraising. He has set up a fundraiser on Impact-Guru, for which students and alumni from his college have been helping out to raise the ₹4 crore needed.

The drug called Evrysdi (Risdiplam) is expected to stop the progression of Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). He explains that things could have been very different, "I couldn't crawl as a child so my parents took me to a neurologist, but due to lack of technology back then, I was misdiagnosed." Which only happened when he was 13. "I have memories of playing cricket with my friends when I was eight. But, by the time I was 12, I was completely on a wheelchair and couldn't walk."

At the moment, he can use his mouth and hands to some extent, which had helped with his career path. He loves being a teacher. "If I don't get this medicine, that'll cease to be the case and my complete iden-



tity as a teacher and a scientist will be lost," Abhinand says.

By the time the professor finished his undergrad degree in Biotechnology, his hands had grown weaker. "I could do my experiments while sitting in a wheelchair but then my hands started losing power," Prof Abhinand says. "I wanted to take up a Master's degree in Biotechnology too but there was no way I could do the experiments," he adds. But, there was something that he could pursue without abandoning Biology entirely. "I settled for Bioinformatics. It is a field that tries to solve biological problems using computational technology and algorithms," the professor says. He started doing his PhD in 2011 and went on to be a part-time teacher in 2015. It was only in 2019 that he became a full-time faculty member at the institute.

Abhinand couldn't go abroad as he can't live alone with his disease

## Learn more

Spinal Muscular Atrophy destroys motor cells and leads to degeneration of cells in the brain and spinal cord

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Ever since I read that book (*The Selfish Gene*), I had this absolute love for genetics and I wanted to be a biologist

Prof Dr PA Abhinand



will power