

## PHARMACISTS AND CONSUMER RIGHTS

During 1992, Harjot Ahluwalia, a minor was admitted to Spring Meadows Hospital, New Delhi, for treatment of typhoid. The hospital nurse administered the injection Larigao intravenously. Within minutes the child collapsed while still in the lap of his mother. Before administering the injection, the nurse had not made any sensitive test to find out whether there would be any adverse reaction to the patient.

When the situation turned critical, he was shifted to All India Institute of Medical Sciences, where the parents were informed that even if the child would survive, he would live only in a vegetable state, as irreparable damage had been caused to his brain and there was no chance of revival of the damaged parts.

The above case highlights the role of pharmacists and the paramedical staff in protecting the right of the patients (consumer). Whether it is a nurse or a medicine dispenser, they make all the difference between life and death.

If the nurse had taken little care, which is her duty, she could have saved the child and probably her job.

Unfortunately the role of pharmacists in protecting patients' rights has never caught the attention of the pharmacy councils. Very rarely the pharmacist's job is considered as a profession.

Opening a medicine selling shop is seen as the ultimate aim of pharmacy education. Unlike in the West, where a pharmacist is considered next to a doctor, here a pharmacist is no better than a seller of groceries.

Over the years the role of pharmacist has become more crucial. For example the quantum jump in sale of over the counter (OTC) drugs has increased the dangers of wrong medication.

Today a pharmacist sells more drugs without a prescription. The World Health Organization estimates that in India more than 47 to 50 per cent of medicines sold are without prescriptions. What more, this includes antibiotics and other non-essential drugs.

The demand for OTC drugs may partly be attributed to growing medical knowledge and health awareness among the consumers. Today the media is supplying tons of information about drugs, medicines and other health related issues. There is no magazine without a column on health. While this is a positive development, it also has certain dangers.

For example consumers take medicines based on the similar facts of a different person published in a magazine. Consumers should know that no two persons are alike and no drug may react differently in the same person at different times.

Secondly the invasion of medicine by Information Technology has brought in its own dangers. Today we have several portals and online shops selling medicines and drugs directly to the consumers. Realizing the dangers of online medication some efforts are made to prescribe a code of conduct for sellers. But self regulation seldom works.

Fortunately the pharmacy Council of India which is celebrating its golden jubilee this year, has started to do some soul searching. In coordination with State Pharmacy Councils and pharmacy colleges, action plan has been drawn up to set its house in order. Besides, the council has started addressing issues related to consumers and their protection.

Recently the Karnataka State Pharmacy Council has established a Drug Information Centre at Bangalore. Such centre already exists in Gujarat and Maharashtra.

The Mumbai based Association for Consumer Action on Safety and Health (ACASH) has been disseminating drug related information especially for consumers.

However mere providing information cannot bring in the desired changes. The pharmacy Council should ensure that pharmacy education include a subject on patients' rights, rational drug use etc.

Pharmacists and sellers of medicines should be made more accountable towards their profession.

The drug regulatory authority should exercise its power and see that pharmacists do not take consumers for a ride.

For example very few pharmacy shops exhibit their licences. Many shops are run on benami basis. Pharmacist is seldom present in the shop and his presence cannot be known. Wearing badges or identity cards should be made mandatory.

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