

Medical ethics in India

Doctors in countries with a low GNP face a dilemma: unless they have private patients, their standard of living will be much lower at home than abroad. So doctors in India, even when they are employed by the State, rely on private patients. There has been widespread concern that doctors and administrators have sometimes taken actions which were not in the interest of their patients. A group of doctors in Bombay has founded a Forum for Medical Ethics, which publishes since 1993 a quarterly journal, *Medical Ethics*, the only journal of its kind in India. The Forum began when an attempt to win seats in an election to the Maharashtra Medical Council (MMC) failed—an election which reads like Chicago in the days of prohibition. The MMC is a body despised and discredited by doctors and lay persons alike, but the government appears unwilling to reform either the council or the election farce. The Forum believes that ethical and moral standards are plummeting and that the 'credo is to make profits'. The Forum hopes to arrest that fall.

One of the founders is Dr S. K. Pandya, known to many for his 'Letter from Bombay' in the *British Medical Journal*. It was this letter which discussed the tragedy caused by the adulterated glycerol (it was actually ethylene glycol) sold to the pharmacy of the Sir J. J. Hospital in Bombay and the subsequent enquiry by Justice B. Lentin: an enquiry without action.

When the first cases of AIDS and of HIV-positive people were diagnosed in India, there was a panic reaction on the part of the politicians, police, press, public and the medical profession. Legal rights were ignored and women were arrested and imprisoned. Some large hospitals in Bombay insist that all patients seeking help must be tested for HIV antibodies. *Medical Ethics* has already published several articles and letters on this subject and a recent issue has an article on AIDS and the Law by Justice Michael Kirby of the Supreme Court of Sydney, Australia, an outstanding and outspoken authority on this issue. Another local concern has been the forced hysterectomy

of mentally handicapped women in state institutions; a statement by PAYAY, a group based in Pune, has offered humane alternatives.

This lively journal has book reviews, letters and provocative articles. It is working to swell the ranks of ethical doctors in India, 'In addition to caring for our patients, let us try to heal our ailing profession'.

Ethical issues are not confined to India or to the medical profession. Experiments on animals and embryos, patents on cell lines, germ plasm and plants and many other issues fill the newspapers in Europe and America. Standards of teaching and research are being questioned in Britain. Many of us have considered a Hippocratic Oath for biologists before granting professional qualification. Scientists need standards too.

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Enhancing indigenous S & T coverage in media

To popularize the results of research findings of our thousands of researchers actively working in critical areas of science and technology, the write-up 'Enhancing indigenous science coverage in communication media' discussed some ways and means to highlight our achievements in the S & T sector¹. Endorsing this indigenous initiative, three science writers voiced similar concern². In fact, one of the science writers, K. N. Pandey, suggested rationally that the Popular Science Wing of the Union Ministry of S & T should come forward to allocate the funds, ensuring the purchase of leading Indian S & T journals as well as their distribution to the active science writers.

Surprisingly, among all the quarters the well-known fortnightly journal of research, *Current Science* has come forward with an excellent offer of providing *Current Science* gratis to 12 members of

the national body of science communicators, the Indian Science Writers' Association (ISWA). This kind gesture on the part of *Current Science* is indeed a welcome step. In fact, its editor, Professor S. Ramaseshan, deserves all praise for promptly taking this decision. The ISWA is now finalising the names of 12 writers who could utilize this golden opportunity.

With this backdrop, one wonders whether the popular-science managers in the Union Ministry of S & T are even aware of this scheme published in two issues of *Current Science*^{1,2}. With an annual budget of over 40 million rupees, it should not at all be difficult for the Popular Science Wing of the S & T Ministry—the National Council for Science & Technology Communication (NCSTC)—to implement this novel scheme on an experimental basis. In fact,

this particular initiative falls very much under the purview of the NCSTC mandate. However, in the recent past two more outfits have emerged: the NCSTC-Network (a government-cum-voluntary-cum-nongovernmental body) and an autonomous organization, the *Vigyan Prasar*. One really does not know which one of these three will now provide the much-needed push to this indigenous initiative.

1. Jain, N. C., *Curr. Sci.*, 1994, 66, 98.
2. Salwi, Dilip M., Singh, Ranbir and Pandey, K. N., *Curr. Sci.* 1994, 67, 149-150 (independent letters).

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