Pharmacology versus therapeutics: Lessons from the life of Dr.V.Iswariah - An unconventional pharmacologist

Pharmacology is at cross roads. The place and status of pharmacology in the medical curriculum is hazy. Medical students decry the way it is taught, its examinations, its uselessness when they practice. The staff dislike the practicals. Together they decry the present curriculum / regulations of the MCI.

Not all choose pharmacology as a career, including Sir Henry Dale. Realizing this now pharmacologists of repute in the Western Universities have migrated to greener pastures of drug research in the industry offering better facilities and financial returns.

Dr. Iswariah was one of the country’s stalwarts in pharmacology of the last century. He was devoted to therapeutics, and known for fierce honesty in thought, word and deed. His views are very much relevant at this present juncture, when animal experiments are restricted and despised, access to patients minimal and practicals restructured as theoretical exercises of therapeutics.

After a short posting in the Madras Medical Service in 1927 at Lovedale Hospital in Nilgiris, Dr. Iswariah was posted as lecturer in Materia Medica at Medical School, Thanjavur. In 1929, he was deputed to Department of Pharmacology headed by Dr.R.N. Chopra at School of Tropical Medicine, Kolkata. This, in his own words, was “much against my will after failing in my various attempts to evade Pharmacology by frank and even questionable methods”. In 1934, he obtained his MRCP (Edin) with pharmacology as a special subject and FRFPS (Glasgow). But the label of a pharmacologist was stuck to him and he was posted as lecturer in pharmacology, Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam.

He felt he should have a share in therapeutics as he was very particular that pharmacologists should be involved in therapeutics and clinical medicine but was denied treating patients as a pharmacologist. He had introduced M.D. (Pharmacology and Therapeutics) in Andhra University with 2 examiners in pharmacology and 2 in medicine, with clinical and practical pharmacology examinations. He was a prolific writer on therapeutics each year in journals meant for physicians. Yet he never indulged in private practice. He authored the Text Book of Pharmacology and Therapeutics – David, Iswariah Gurusami – with more than 15 editions.

He is known for his fierce and unbending independence and for continually confronting British principals during the hey-days of British rule. Each of his official letters at Andhra Medical College was a fiery epistle, speaking volumes of his independent spirit and read almost like fiction.

Some incidents with excerpts from his letters to the principals which earned their ire:

- “Pharmacology department is being run by one designated ‘Lecturer’ and who is assigned the duties of ‘Professors’ of other departments, and is assigned remuneration identical to the ‘assistant to professors’ of other departments. … This has lead to the department of pharmacology not being represented in the college council, whereas biochemistry and bacteriology, which are addenda to the major subjects of physiology and pathology, find a place. As such, discussions on the subject of pharmacology in the college council are bound to invite views from members who have no knowledge of the working of the department”.

- In days when examinerships are actively sought after, Dr.Iswariah once declined an offer of internal examinership by the Andhra University. Dr.J.F Shepherd, Principal, wrote him a D.O. letter ‘it is only in exceptional circumstances that a member of staff may decline an internal examinership in his own subject’. Dr.Iswariah replied by a D.O. letter beginning with “Dear Sir, The Registrar of the Andhra University is not within his bounds in writing to the Principal to exert official pressure over an issue not covered by the college rules and regulations. The offer and acceptance of an examinership is purely an obligatory convention and not a mandate’. Dr.Shepherd pulled him up for writing a personal D.O. letter to him. Dr.Iswariah retorted by writing “1. The matter of internal examinership is a matter between me and the University 2. My reply to you is prefixed ‘not official’ and ‘Dear Sir’ as I received a similar letter from the Principal. 3. The Principal has exceeded his limits in writing this letter to me”. From the adjacent correspondence in the records, it is surmised that Dr. Iswariah had taken a few lectures in pharmacology to students of pharmacy department, Andhra University. He did not wish to be an internal examiner for them at Andhra University and declined the offer of the University.

- His sense of humor peeps out in many of his letters. Once a lecturer in Hygiene felt insulted and complained to the Principal. Dr. Iswariah replied “As the Lecturer in Hygiene feels insulted where no insult was meant, I have the honor to state that I am prepared to offer him an apology on bent knee or any other position he may prefer to choose”.

In 1951 he told me “You must be a mad cap to select pharmacology”. In the certificate given to me to appear before the Public Services Commission, he wrote, “Dr. H. has chosen to work in department of pharmacology, when everybody is leaving it like rats from a sinking ship”. To a lady demonstrator applying for a post of lecturer he wrote “this lady does not
know the difference between a cat and a dog.” He never minced
his words, whatever the situation.

These few incidents from the life of Dr. Iswariah narrated
above should come as a shot in the arm to the present
generation of pharmacologists, not to give up but continue to
fight at the levels of Universities and MCI till pharmacology
finds its rightful place in the curriculum of training basic doctors
for the country. Dr. Iswariah was one of the few rebels who
consistently fought against the injustice perpetuated to
pharmacology in delinking it from its legitimate place in
practical therapeutics.

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**THE 6th INDO-US FLOW CYTOMETRY WORKSHOP ON
MONITORING OF STEM CELL PHENOTYPE,
PROLIFERATION AND APOPTOSIS**

**Date**: 05-12 February, 2006

**Venue**: Biomedical Technology wing, Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

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