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Editorial

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Toxicology - Need of the hour

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It is exactly 15 years since my daughter (then an infant of less than 1 year) consumed some cockroach bait that I had so negligently placed around the house, and mercifully recovered. Fifteen years since I swore to wake up the subject of toxicology from its dreamless slumber in India and put it to some real use for the benefit of the teeming thousands of poisoned victims dying in this country every year; those victims who are not as fortunate as my daughter who had the advantages of a doctor parent, an accessible sophisticated medical facility, and a cockroach bait that turned out to be non-toxic to humans (and even to cockroaches!).

Fifteen years is a long time to us, but just the blink of an eye in the historical evolution of medicine that dates back so many hundreds of years. So what has changed with reference to toxicology in India in this span of time? Perhaps, somebody else, an objective, neutral observer, should really answer this question. Be that as it may, at the risk of being subjective, I do feel that there has been a perceptible improvement in the way the subject is being treated today, as compared to the situation that existed when my baby daughter chewed on the (non-toxic!) cockroach bait with relish that fateful evening so many summers ago. Not a quantum leap towards perfection to be sure, but a modest little hop all the same. The main thing, the important thing is that at least now physicians are beginning to acknowledge, however grudgingly, the fact that there is a specialty called toxicology that could offer some help to them in some situations.

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This in itself is a major achievement, when one considers the fact that when I first set out to do something in this neglected area of medicine, I had to endure contemptuous statements like "Toxicology? Why on earth should I bother myself with a subject that has nothing to offer me by way of improvement in patient care? I know all there is to know about poisoning, and how to deal with it. I don't need a toxicologist for that." Today an average physician in India is not so (arrogantly) dumb. This is reflected by the substantial increase in teaching hours on matters related to poisoning or overdose in subjects like Pharmacology, Forensic Medicine, Internal Medicine, and Pediatrics at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. But unfortunately, even now there is no move to detach these toxicological fragments from the subjects mentioned, and put them together into a cohesive, independent specialty as has been done in the West long ago. It is actually to this end that I had begun my campaign one and a half decades ago, and shall not rest until the day dawns when the Medical Council of India finally "creates" this very important, indeed vital, new discipline of medical toxicology in India, and accords it the respect that it so richly deserves.

And so, even though I have accomplished some of the goals I set out to achieve, such as a revamp of information resources in toxicology, popularizing the concept of Poison Control Centers in major hospitals, and the creation of a professional organization (with its own journal) dedicated to toxicology, I still have a long way to go; in Robert Frost's words, "miles to go before I sleep." As I trudge along this long and arduous path to toxicological salvation, I need all the help I can get from my professional colleagues. And that is why I must record my deep sense of gratitude to eminent friends like Prof. Anil Aggrawal who have been a constant source of encouragement and support right from the time I became an obsessive-compulsive toxicologist 15 years ago. His gracious offer of a special issue on toxicology in his esteemed online journal is but one more precious nugget in my slowly filling coffer.

So if at all you, dear reader, find this special issue on toxicology of some interest or use, then you know whom to thank.

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