

## Misconception

Misconception is a wrong or inaccurate idea or conception. It is one of the biggest challenges in public health to fight illness and disease in an individual or the populations. Take for example diarrhoea, which can be fatal in very small children unless treated. To convince the mother against believing that to continue to give fluids to the child is more likely to increase the intensity of diarrhoea. She has been made to believe this from her mother, who learnt from her mother and so on. Little that she knows, not the diarrhoea but the dehydration, which is going to kill the child. There are umpteen examples of similar misconceptions which are not only useless or wasteful, but can be even dangerous, such as "I won't quit smoking cigarettes as my father smoked and lived to his nineties and so would I". Some communities believe that being fat is a sign of prosperity and prestige in society.

On more exploitative side misconceptions are use of antibiotics for the treatment of flu or unnecessary intravenous infusion, often mixed with multivitamins to feel strong. I remember observing in Laos a middle aged women coming to health centre with a bottle of IV fluid and asking health centre staff to infuse her as she felt weak. Multivitamins and other supplements is a multi billion dollar business in the world today. One has to only visit any drug store in a mall, where rows and rows of supplements are on display. There even exists exclusive stores devoted to these items. Slimming diets and products are a lucrative business and young girls are convinced that these products help them to remain slim and beautiful. Advertising award winning complete protein powder supplement for athletes and bodybuilders and more!

Pharmaceuticals and medical profession have a lot to answer. I remember as a young intern, how drug company representatives would queue outside the doctor's office to introduce new drugs and they always had a tonic with magical virtues to strengthen the patient. Most doctors fall for it and continue to prescribe, without questioning, what has been instilled into them by pharmaceuticals. Public trusts the doctors, believes and follows the advice given as the best treatment. Multiple millions of dollars successful claims and pending cases are there against major pharmaceuticals for promoting products in spite of ample information on the risks and dangers of their wares.

### **Innocent or ignorant misconceptions is understandable**

Communities developed norms and associations to certain dos and don'ts leading to taboos and ways to alleviate discomfort or illness. Grandmother's recipe for fever or cough was the first step to be followed. Body has an inbuilt mechanism of dealing with most illnesses and often people recover after a few days of discomfort. How true is the common saying, "If you treat cold it lasts seven days and if you don't, it lasts for a week"

Since ancient times, illnesses, pain, bereavement, psychological and mental illnesses have all existed. People tried to address these issues in whatever way they could within the home. And if the problem persisted, outside help was sought. Certain people became experts, so called traditional practitioners or shaman and gained fame for their skills of handling problems. Some were lucky, others fake and a few genuine. Slowly systems of medicine developed from the experience of these experts. Greek, Siddha, Unani, Homeopathic and Allopathic systems appeared and have continued to develop into specific sciences, with millions of followers who believe in it. Greeks embraced the concept "a healthy mind in a healthy body". One thing common to all these systems was, helping the affected person with ethical approach, and Hippocratic Oath came into existence. (see under Home > Old Items February 24, 2019)

### **Egregious promotion of misconception is unethical**

Things started to derail from ethical to profit oriented approach, based on exploiting ignorance of

general public and misleading them to undertake unnecessary interventions for personal gains of the few. Although there were great achievements in lifesaving drugs, penicillin, smallpox eradication and the like, pharmaceutical industry saw the opportunity to go for exorbitant gains. Every possible way to exploit the ignorance of people and the system are being utilised. Health was a social service but it has turned to pure cutthroat business. Research - including bogus research, undue influence, cynical use of media, fake news and publicity all are being used to accumulate wealth. (see under Home > Old Items Frustrations of a conscientious health worker August 18, 2019)

Religion was there to help the soul and relieve stress and pain through kindness of the religious leaders. However, it is all about control today. Religion controls day to day life, determines the status of women in society and their ability to control fertility which would ease the stress and pain during their reproductive life. Lifesaving immunisations are restricted or prohibited by religious leaders in certain societies.

Governments decide the fate of their subjects, not with service in mind but how policies would re-elect them in the next election. Indisputable advantages of universal primary health care proposed more than forty years ago, is still not implemented in most LMICs to alleviate pain and suffering of poor people.

Countries are at war with an excuse of helping certain section of community but everyone knows that it is doing greater harm than good to a few. Instead of saving lives taking life is being expected as a norm.

It is a grim situation but there is hope. One cannot change the world nor is it intended. However, I am convinced that the only way one can help is to work as an individual and do the right thing without harming anyone around us. We can influence people by practicing and demonstrating fairness and kindness around us. It is infectious and very likely to intensify. Keeping quiet is participating with the negative forces.

*The rich must live more simply so that the poor may simply live. - M K Gandhi.*