HEALTHCARE: TRADITION VS MODERNITY A CASE OF FISH MEDICINE FOR ASTHMA IN HYDERABAD

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ABSTRACT

Health is a more complex phenomenon dependent on a host of factors such as biological, physical, socio-cultural and psychological. The dynamic relationship of social and cultural factors has profound and multifaceted implications on health. Since the ancient times, every society has been given tremendous significance to preserve the public health in order to be protected by reducing disease. As a part of remedy, several acts came into force as practices of the indigenous health healing system in accordance with the culture and environment of a particular society which are still persisting.

The development of indigenous health knowledge systems covers all aspects of life, including social, cultural, economical and technical features. Indigenous knowledge has been a matter of survival to the people who generated these systems. Such knowledge systems are cumulative, representing generations of experience, and trial and error experiments. Indigenous health knowledge is stored in peoples’ memories and activities and it is expressed in the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and taxonomy, agricultural practices, equipment, materials, plant species, and animal breeds. Indigenous health knowledge is shared and communicated orally, by specific examples and through culture. Indigenous forms of communication and organization are vital to local - level decision-making process and to the preservation, development and spread of indigenous knowledge.
INTRODUCTION

A CASE OF FISH MEDICINE

The MrughashiraKartheis one of the seasons in the Telugu calendar which consists of 24 Karthes (Seasons). Among them MrighashiraKarthe has its own significance because it comes in the first week of June. During June, several new agro-related works start such as Eravika (seeds sowing), worship of conglomerates of diets (local goddess) etc. Generally, in the Deccan region summer ends with June and rainy season starts thereafter. Previously, people practiced certain traditional practices to overcome the sudden changes in climate. In tune with the climatic changes, people started eating fish because they produce lot of body heat by which they can overcome the drastic fall in temperature and adjust with the nature.

Every year, thousands thronged the fish medicine mela that held on arrival day of MrughashiraKartheat the Nampally Exhibition Grounds, Hyderabad. Asthma patients from various parts of the country and even abroad were seen queuing up for the fish ‘prasadam’ (as fish medicine) from early hours on that day. In fact, the fisheries department of Andhra Pradesh provides about 1,00,000 fingerlings every year by 8 pm on that day, within two hours of the BathiniGoud (traditional healer) family starting the fish prasadammela. Vegetarians are given the same medicine mixed in jaggery. The medicinal paste is considered a secret legacy of the Goud family since 1845, which it claims can cure asthma.

While the number of people seeking this traditional medicine has been dipping over the last few years, there were quite a few faithfuls who turned up for the ‘fish prasadam’. Thousands of people from across the country even abroad were seen at the exhibition grounds to seek relief from the nagging asthmatic condition. Several people from Delhi, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Karnataka, etc came down for this 24-hour event.

The researcher observed that from aging grandfathers to young boys and girls, from BPO executives and management students to the poor who cannot afford treatment for their chronic asthma, patients started gathering at the venue as dawn broke out. In fact, some people even started queuing up from a day before.

For the BathiniGoud family this has been a good year so far. The various law suits filed against them (regarding the content of the prasadam and its efficacy) were dismissed by various courts. Meanwhile, several NGOs and the water board ensured availability of food and water to make the stay of the people convenient in the scorching heat.

However, Asthma has no cure but when thousands from across the country turn up to swallow a live fish at BathiniGoud’s camp for free asthma cure even the most critical tend to wonder if the ‘medicine’ (prasadam) is effective at all. While rationalists rubbish this ‘miracle cure’ as humbug, Gouds maintain that their prasadam, a yellow paste the ingredients of which are a family secret, offers a ‘100 per cent cure’ for asthma. The truth lies somewhere in between and health experts maintain that Goud’s fish therapy should co-exist with other forms of medicines available. A reality check, if needed, should be before and after tests conducted on those who take this fish therapy. But no such research has been done to date.
So, bogged down by controversy, the Gouds have changed the name of the yellow paste from ‘medicine’ to ‘prasadam’ to ‘herbal food supplement’ now. They continue to hard-sell it though, stating that the paste in the fish’s mouth cures asthmatics of their bouts of breathlessness. How? Well, the Gouds state that the “live fish travels, wagging its tail and fins, through the throat and negotiates the phelgm congestion” and thus curing the patient. Of course, there are several dietary restrictions and follow up doses after the camp.

**VIEWS OF FOLLOWERS**

Jyothi Sharma (29) was one of them. A Jammu resident, Sharma said she heard about the ‘prasadam’ from a dispensary she has been frequenting for the last six years. “Although I am not sure that the ‘prasadam’ will cure the disease but after suffering for so long and with my three-year-old son also developing an allergy, I thought there is no harm trying it,” says the mother of two. Among those who came was also an Arab sheikh, HumeraFarooq, from Dubai who took the ‘prasadam’ for the second time. “I have some relief (ever since I took it the first time) and hence, I am here for the second dose,” said Humera who was accompanied by her husband. The Gouds say that a four-dose fish medicine cures people of asthma completely.

KambleBhasker from Beed district of Maharashtra, whose nine-year-old son is taking the ‘prasadam’ for the first time, was inspired to come here by his neighbour who claimed to have got much relief after taking the medicine for three years. “He gets breathless each time he eats anything cold. I have decided to bring my son for the next two years so that he can lead a normal life,” said Kamble who works for the agriculture department.

Naval Gupta (49), a railway employee from Mumbai said that after trying allopathy, homeopathy and ayurvedic treatment for asthma, he is now hoping that at least through this ‘prasadam,’ the fatigue, weakness and breathlessness which he has been battling with for the last four years would subside. The Bathini family set up 32 counters for administration of the ‘prasadam.’
People wait for fish medicine at the Exhibition Grounds in Hyderabad

THE CONTROVERSIAL DEBATE ON FISH MEDICINE:

Nevertheless, doctors smirk at the scientific inadequacy of Goud’s explanation. “Goud said in a television interview that the fish induces the release of certain enzymes in the stomach. Asthma is not related to the oesophagus or the stomach lining or to the release of enzymes,” says pulmonologist DrVyakarnamNageshwar.

Health experts point out that even tablets (for asthma) go into the stomach and then get into the blood stream. “We are asking the Goud brothers to give a reply in terms of modern medicine and that is very unfair,” says DrVeenaShatrugna, former deputy director of the National Institute of Nutrition. She says that modern medicine does not know what to do with most asthmas and is being “pompous and arrogant” in rubbing Goud’s fish therapy.

While some doctors say that the fish could just be the tool carrying the medicinal paste into the patient’s body, others note that the use of fish is not without reason. “Today we know that the fish contains a particular kind of fatty acid, N3, and people who have suffered a heart attack are being asked to eat fish. It could be that N3 that helps people with coronary diseases could also work in this condition (asthma),” says Shatrugna, however adding that some basic research on the ‘prasadam’ could help verify that.

A serious concern about the paste used by the Gouds was the presence of steroids in it, the cases against which were filed by Jana VignanaVedika. The cases were set aside by the courts last month. Pulmonologist with Apollo Hospitals, DrPradyutWaghray, says that what made doctors like him doubtful about the presence of steroids was the Goud family asking patients to come for four doses over four years. They suspected a lumpsum and one of depot-time dose steroids and that have are an effect given that lasts longer. But the presence of steroids was ruled out when tests were conducted at many places including Indian Institute of Chemical Technology.

Jana VignanaVedika continues to argue that the ingredients of the ‘prasadam’ need to be disclosed and a label put on it. But, others believe in the fish-therapy co-existing with the many others available. “I have seen a case where the patient came back (from the fish medicine camp) with a bout. But at the same time I have patients who have got relief,” says DrWaghray, adding that Goud’s has its own place. “People should continue with conventional treatment and use it as add-on therapy,” he notes.

PROTESTS ROCKED FOR SCIENTICISM IN THE CITY

Protests rocked the city even as believers queued up in huge numbers for an answer to asthma. The waters surrounding the fish medicine turned murkier this year. From suspicions about the authenticity of the contents of the miracle drug to the slapping of a High Court directive that specified posting warning messages at the venue. The low-down on the heated debate even as thousands queued up to ingest the drug-filled murrel from the Bathini brothers’ traditional medicine at the Exhibition Grounds.
VIEWS OF EMINENT PERSONS

Dr PM Bhargava, former director CCMB is described the process is a violation of the patients’s right to information, and is thus unconstitutional, illegal and unethical. An analysis of the constituents of the medicine by Vimta Labs in Hyderabad had found that the steroid content is dangerous to human beings. Those who are behind this mass deception should be put in jail, and the government should stop supporting them.

Chandana Chakrabarti, social activist said that patients who are taking the drug every year are not monitored, and there is no proof to show that they are all asthmatic or that they have been cured by the fish. It is illogical to say that if the content is revealed the medicine would lose its effect, or it should be administered only on a specific date. One does not even know whether people have developed fatal symptoms or died because of it.

Dr. Gayanand, president to Jana Vignana Vedika said that their protests are based on a survey conducted on 1000 people who had taken the medicine for two years. None of them was cured. The government should spread awareness about the possible side effects of the wonder medicine.

Bhaskar Rao, homoeo practitioner and social worker is expressed his view in this regard that both my children were asthmatic and were cured by the medicine. Bathinis’ efforts should be lauded. Trying to prevent someone from doing social service does not make sense.

Alladi Chandrasekhar, ayurvedic physician shared his expressed the Bathini brothers’ way of administering the fish medicine is in accordance with the principles of ayurveda. Many ayurvedic medicines contain crude forms of steroids whose side effects are nullified as they are plant extract. The Bathini brothers should not be blamed until they are found doing anything wrong.

Dr Dhiraj Nanda, homoeo practitioner told that every system of medicine has its limitations. It might work in some cases and fail in others, he told that he has met two people who claim they were completely cured by the drug and he has treated many others who were not cured. There should be a proper follow-up on the patients before reaching a conclusion.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous health knowledge has two powerful advantages over outside knowledge; it has little or no cost and is readily available. Indigenous health knowledge systems and technologies are found to be socially desirable, economically affordable, and sustainable and involve minimum risk to the people who are practicing and producing, and above all, they are widely believed to conserve resources. There are situations in which modern science is not appropriate, and use of simpler technologies and procedures are required. Thus, Indigenous knowledge provides basis for problem solving strategies for local communities, especially the poor. In hopeless conditions people are forcibly adopting fish medicine as an alternative to modern medicine. However, all indigenous kind of medicine should be tested in the modern laboratories and should be identified by AYUSH department. If the traditional medicine works properly, the community should be given the patient rights but not the individual. The practitioners should allow to use the modern healthcare infrastructure, tools and laboratories so that the functional traditional medicine provides fruitful results.