



SECOND COVID WAVE RE-IGNITES THE DEBATE ON MODERN VS. ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

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KEYWORDS :

"It is terribly easy to shake a man's faith in himself. To take advantage of that to break a man's spirit is devil's work" – George Bernard Shaw

The COVID-19 pandemic with its ebbs and flows has wreaked havoc across families and communities, young and old, rich and poor alike and has led the medical man to question his own purpose, methods and usefulness. For nearly 18 months now, the medical community, from a mere trainee to the aged senior consultant alike, has selflessly pledged itself to win this devastating battle against an invisible enemy. Most of our young residents have been working overtime, risking their own safety, losing out on their training years, away from their families, some even infected twice over [1]. So far the casualties among doctors in India has reached 864! [2]

The widespread ramifications of this pandemic have brought the shortcomings of modern medicine to the forefront-mutating viruses, numerous avatars of the disease, the ultra-long wait for cures or vaccines, the utter helplessness to tackle cytokine storm with the double-edged sword of over-abused immunosuppression.

Science is the systematic study of the structure and function of physical and natural world through observation and experiment. Its application to maintain health, diagnose and treat disease constitutes modern medicine. Unlike pure sciences, its ill-timed or ill-applied methods may lead to devastating consequences in terms of disability or loss of life. Hence, the scientific medical man prides himself on diagnosing and treating a disease based on published evidence, prior experience and response rates in carefully designed and executed randomized control trials, involving complex statistical analyses and allowing for human, statistical or technical errors.

However, at the level of the population, a disease often gets treated serendipitously by a quack, prior experience by the patient himself and very rarely by a disciplined clinician. This scenario is especially true in a country like India, with its ever-growing population of 1339 million, its heterogenous cultures, its mixed and confused perception of health and healing [3]. When the diligent physician is reliant on the aid of academic forums to constantly update himself of the ever-changing and ever-expanding world of modern medicine, little can be expected of the Indian populace to make sense of these changes. With a legacy of traditionally inculcated beliefs of health or disease as fruits of one's past life, abysmal baseline scientific knowledge of one's own body, literacy rate of 74.04%, our people have discovered their go-to health guru in Google! [3] While most of our population inherently distrusts modern medicine with its many drugs and injections, astronomical costs of privatized medical care, they have found refuge in the arms of alternate medical sciences like *Ayurveda* and *Homeopathy* with their lure of prevention over treatment, temptation of quick, painless and cheap solutions, natural cures and lack of side effects. Their blatant disregard for published scientific evidence, lack of systematic study or experience, ignorance of the components of their own treatment and lack of accountability for failed treatment is truly astonishing in the wake of continued attacks on medical professionals who are beaten up for death of a sick patient. It is ironical that the political machinery and mass media are both silent when over 75% of doctors face abuse at workplace [4].

The ignorance of the situation, difficult access to healthcare, economic burden, loss of a dear one has led the people to react in anger. It is most unfortunate that the long-suffering doctor, who in most cases is an

overworked, underpaid, ill-fed medical trainee is the easy and soft target. A year and a half is long enough for this country to pass into the fifth and final stage of the grief reaction-acceptance. Acceptance that the problem is real, that there will be loss of near and dear ones, that the solution is one of long-term lifestyle changes, that life will never carry on the same way again. Acceptance that it may be impossible to cater to a humongous crowd all at once, that the one treating you is just as human, that cure and life are not commodities and cannot be bought.

It has always been a grouse of the literati that an educated man never makes it to the top in leading the masses. Never has this feeling been felt more keenly than now. India spends most of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense and a menial percentage on healthcare and has been hit where it hurts the most and left wondering whether we are in the middle of a modern world war! [5] We have been pushed to the corner to roll out dramatic cures and vaccines in a matter of mere months with an incredibly sized down budget or supplies, immense political pressure and overwhelmingly high expectations. A clever leader must now realize that the modern battleground is the hospital and victory lies in health! The urgent need to invest in healthcare, organization of medical training and care, formulation and adherence to strict protocols is most acutely felt at the present moment. While acknowledging that enforced restrictions have led to grave economic concerns and there being a great hurry to resume routine activities, one must also consider that the loss of life and skilled work-force has an even graver economic impact in a country that relies on its human resource.

Today, conspiracy theories galore and allopathic medicine is being subjected to both verbal and physical abuse by Godmen-turned-businessmen in India. Incidents of verbal and physical abuse of doctors grow day by day. It has left us in a mist of self-doubt, insecurity, fear and uncertainty.

One must always ask oneself - is this the way to move forward? Does mud-slinging and foul-mouthing one's colleagues help diminish the disability, misery, suffering and death of our people? Have our egos and our selfish interests gotten the better of us at a time when we must strive for a united front?

No man or method can lay a sole claim on the art of healing. Both allopathy and Ayurveda have their own rich legacies, their successes and their limitations. Why not look at the pandemic as a golden opportunity to enrich the lives of our people by amalgamating our knowledge and experience to help us achieve our purpose to serve our patients? While allopathic medicine may cure a manifest disease, might not Ayurveda join hands to prevent it? Might it not be more fruitful to support each other in such tense times instead of embarking on a blame-game?

Courage in danger is half the battle! At a time when the morale of the medical community and the country has been left broken, it is self-destructive to publicly defame and attack doctors. This is the time for us to recognize not out colleagues, but the virus as our enemy and face the battle head on! History has shown us that even a great big population like ours could survive the first wave with minimal casualties. The only way forward is to accept the situation, follow social-distancing precautions and vaccinate ourselves and our families, for the human spirit is stronger than anything that can happen to it!

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