

OBITUARY

Dr Wishvas Rane (1930-2008)

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The passing away of Wishvas Rane or Babu brought back memories of the various initiatives in which we were involved together since the late 1970s, and his mature, honest, rational approach from which we learnt so much. I got acquainted with Babu in the late '70s when the Aarogya Dakshata Mandal, a Pune-based health NGO led by Arvind Patwardhan and Dr Rane, launched a pictorial health education periodical in Marathi called *Silver Oak*. This pioneering periodical was aimed at the neo-literate population, but was widely read by a much larger section of people because the contents were relevant, practical, to the point and scientifically sound.

Aarogya Dakshata Mandal, due to the enthusiastic leadership of Dr Patwardhan, also launched the *Pune Journal of Continuing Education*, a monthly devoted to the continuing medical education of doctors on rational therapeutics. The *Pune Journal*, edited by Dr Rane, contained only four pages of matter printed in tabloid format on newsprint and the annual subscription in the early '80s was a mere Rs 15 (including postage!). It was not supported by any funding agency or government programme and did not accept advertisements from pharmaceutical companies, and Dr Rane's inputs were voluntary. However, it quickly acquired a reputation for its short, high quality, practical pieces with critical information on various standard medical therapies as well as on the irrational and hazardous medicines being widely used by doctors in those days.

Among these irrational medicines were Analgin (the obsolete analgesic and anti-pyretic widely used by almost every general practitioner and also by consultants) and fixed dose combinations of high dose oestrogen and progesterone. Dr Rane also wrote on the irrational use and overuse of phenylbutazone and oxyphenbutazone; about anabolic steroids and about a whole range of irrational fixed dose combinations. This information was based on standard textbooks of pharmacology and on other medical textbooks such as the Physicians' Desk Reference, the British National Formulary, and WHO and UNO publications. In the early '80s, such information was mostly unknown not only to general practitioners but even to many consultants. (We did not then have Dr Chandra Gulhati writing his incisive pieces in *MIMS*, and *Drug Disease Doctor* and *BODHI* were yet to be born.) The *Pune Journal* was an antidote to the propaganda of pharmaceutical companies. It quickly became the talk of the town and continued for almost a decade against all odds.

Dr Rane also played an active role in the All India Drug Action Network (AIDAN) from its inception. The seeds of AIDAN were sown when activists from various backgrounds and regions

came together for a low cost, all-India workshop convened in Pune by Aarogya Dakshata Mandal on rational therapeutics. We chalked out a programme of action against the continued marketing of irrational/hazardous medicines.

By training, Dr Rane was a statistician and then an Ayurvedic graduate. However, because of certain developments in the family he had to get involved in the family business of managing the marketing of pharmaceutical products of Unichem Pharma whose owner had links with the freedom struggle and who was struggling against the domination of multinational corporations. In the process of teaching medical representatives working under him, Dr Rane studied various aspects of allopathic pharmacology and became more knowledgeable about it than most allopathic graduates.

Unichem used to market the oestrogen and progesterone combination EP Forte. Dr Rane was campaigning with us against this obsolete drug, because of which ultimately it was banned. He left the work of Unichem to be with this campaign.

Within AIDAN Dr Rane, the senior-most amongst us activists, played an important, sobering role. Some of us were too fired up because of our ideologies and Dr Rane forced us to come up with hardcore scientific evidence to justify our arguments. In other ways also, his commitment, his straightforward, frank and mature personality helped to stabilise AIDAN. To those who were somewhat closer to him, he offered his advice about our personal problems in the spirit of an elder brother.

One of his main contributions to the Indian drug action movement was his central involvement in collaborating with Mira Shiva for the preparation of the booklet *Banned and bannable drugs*, published by the Voluntary Health Association of India. This book lists the major brands of banned drugs in India, along with the rationale for banning them. It also lists a range of irrational, hazardous drugs that AIDAN wanted to be banned. This book had several revised editions and Dr Rane continued to give detailed inputs for all these editions despite his advancing age. The book was reproduced in a special issue of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* to reach millions of people in India. Later, *The Hindu* carried a series on irrational, hazardous drugs and this series had a much wider readership.

Dr Rane painstakingly documented the rise in prices of different categories of medicines by comparing, every few years, the retail prices of hundreds of medicines as given in relevant editions of *MIMS*. These analyses were published periodically in *The Economic and Political Weekly* and were widely appreciated.

They remain the only such series of studies on the movement of prices of important categories of medicines in India.

Dr Rane not only participated in the campaign for the use of rational medicines and for the use of generic names, he also ventured to start a co-operative factory to manufacture generic formulations in the Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra. Ratnagiri Drugs Private Limited was inaugurated by Zafrullah Choudhary and hailed by many well-wishers but the experiment failed; the expected orders from local governmental hospitals did not come through as Dr Rane was not willing to compromise on his principles. He suffered huge losses but did not depart from his convictions on the use of rational, essential medicines under their generic names. Ratnagiri Drugs was the harbinger of the successful LOCOST experiment launched later by a collective.

Pioneering was part of Dr Rane's nature. This continued till his death, albeit in a poignant way, in his approach to dealing with his advanced cancer of colon. He did undergo surgery and chemotherapy. But when he realised that further therapy would be of questionable value, he decided to stop all treatment

and face his approaching death squarely. He told himself that cancer was his long-term associate (he had prostatic cancer for more than five years) and it would not trouble him. He said that death was inevitable for every living being; it's just that he was dying due to cancer. He remained calm and waited for nature to take its course. Perhaps due to this attitude he survived for two years after stopping all chemotherapy, when doctors had predicted that he would not survive for more than two to four months. These last two years were virtually free of troublesome symptoms. During the last months of his life he wrote a book in Marathi about his encounter with cancer and its treatment. There have been books in Marathi by cancer survivors who share their inspiring stories of overcoming cancer. Dr Rane, in his late 70s, describes his philosophy of facing death with equanimity, as a natural phenomenon. In his characteristic Bapu style -- frank, somewhat detached and matter of fact -- he also shares the experience of various "medical mishaps" during his treatment.

Bapu will continue to inspire us, especially when we are faced with a challenge to launch a pioneering effort.

Thank you, reviewers

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