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Forum

De-mythifying ayurveda

*While some believe that ayurveda provides miraculous cures, others question its authenticity and safety. **Arshiya Khan** tries to dispel some myths associated with ayurveda.*

Myth: Ayurveda is not a science

"Ayurveda is a system of medicine with scientific basis. It has its own set of principles, processes, methodologies and procedures, which are relevant even today, as a guide to better and healthier living," says Dr Rangesh, Senior Medical Advisor, The Himalaya Drug Company.



However, certain experts refuse to accept that ayurveda is a science. "Ayurveda may not be termed a science in modern scientific context, as it did not develop in a test tube or a laboratory. Nor do its concepts change frequently, as it happens in modern scientific allopathic medicine," comments Dr Ravinder K Tuli, Senior Consultant/Head, Holistic Medicine, Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, New Delhi and Founder of Society for Holistic Advancement Of Medicine (SOHAM).

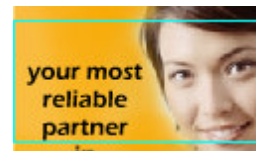
To counter the view, Dr Shefali Thanawala, Medical Advisor, Plethico Pharmaceuticals substantiates that it is a science even in modern sense. "Ayurveda is a fully developed medicinal science with all its branches well placed," she says. "Subjects like basic sciences (anatomy, physiology), diagnostics (Nidana Panchaka), therapeutics (internal medicine, toxicology, pediatrics, rejuvenation therapy, aphrodisiacs), surgical sciences (surgery, ENT and ophthalmology), are properly arranged in eight branches (Ashtanga Ayurveda)," she cites.

C S Jadhav, Director, Marketing, Nandan Biomatrix believes that it is unfair to compare ayurveda and allopathy, "It is one of the most ancient science of the world. One has to understand the basic distinction between ayurveda and Western medicine that ayurveda is experiential in contrast to Western one, which is an experimental science."

Echoes Thanawala, "Ayurveda is a deep and pure science derived from nature, which is very well sustained over thousands of years. Many of the claims of efficacy of herbal medicines are being revalidated through modern research modalities. It would be indeed highly erroneous to call ayurveda a myth."



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Myth: All ayurvedic medicines are natural, and therefore safe

"Being rooted in herbs does not make ayurveda natural and safe. Random mixing of herbs, without adequate research, will not produce an efficacious and safe product," expresses Rangesh. "The safety and efficacy of ayurvedic medicine should be derived from modern scientific research and quality analysis," he adds. However, one of the main challenges faced by Ayurveda is the flouting of rules by several unorganised players within this sector. "Ayurvedic manufacturers as well as practitioners should have a more rational approach and must validate the quality, safety and efficacy claims of their treatment methods/products with globally accepted stringent standards of GMP and GCP respectively," says Thanawala.

Beyond comparison

Allopathy and ayurveda are as different as day and night, and hence the two sets of opposing views. However, if one has to compare ayurveda and allopathy on one platform, then such comparison might be a tad difficult. "Allopathy treats individuals as an independent physical entity like a machine. It is further sub-divided into various organs and systems looked after by different specialities or super/sub-specialities, in which the individual loses one's identity. Whereas, ayurveda treats the individual as a whole, considering him to be a part of the universal whole," explains Rangesh.

A positive aspect in the whole ayurveda vs allopathy issue, is the fact that, people are now open to know more about this ancient science. Also while there might not be prejudices or bias against the same, there are certain misconceptions, which can only be dispelled with knowledge and information dissemination. "There are no prejudices surrounding ayurveda. There may be misconceptions regarding its practice. If anything, the interest in this system of medicine has been growing rapidly both in the domestic and international market, attesting to its popularity and widespread acceptance," says Rangesh.

Myth: Ayurveda is supportive therapy and not curative. It is used as the last resort

"It (ayurveda) is not prescribed by general physicians due to the lack of scientific evaluation. But ayurveda is being preferred as the first line therapy for chronic disorders," states Jadhav. For instance, Liv 52, a long-standing brand from the Himalaya stable is being recommended by doctors even today. "Today, scientific Ayurveda is very much a part of mainstream therapies and is considered complementary, rather than alternative, to allopathic system of medication," states Rangesh. "For instance in Russia, Himalaya's Liv 52 is recommended as an adjuvant to the TB regimen. And if that was the case, Himalaya's Liv 52 would not be amongst the top five selling drugs in India," he adds.

"Ayurveda advocates early intervention as opposed to trying out unknown and untested alternatives. Moreover, for certain ailments like recurrent infections, allergies, gastrointestinal problems and metabolic disorders etc, ayurveda is often the first choice amongst consumers and medical practitioners," informs Rangesh. But when it comes to practice, it is still being given a second rate preference. "Only when people suffering from various common modern ailments do not find any benefit or suffer from innumerable side-effects and toxicities of modern pharmaceuticals, they seek relief in the so-called ayurvedic preparations marketed as harmless herbs or food supplements," says Tuli.

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Myth: Ayurvedic medicines are slow in curing

"Ayurveda heals slowly, but effectively because it influences the entire system," says Jadhav. "Though slower than conventional treatments in acting on systemic disorders, it has its own distinctive benefits," says Rangesh. "People usually try ayurvedic medicines only after they have tried modern medicine and are not satisfied with the result of allopathic medicine, particularly for chronic illness," reasons Jadhav.

"All the alternate systems of health suffered an identity crisis when they could not measure up to instant relief offered by allopathic medicine. The latter has an unchallenged superiority in critical care or emergency medicine, and has to be accepted as the way out in such life-saving situations," says Tuli.

The verdict

Even today, the community stresses on the fact that even though ayurveda may not be a science in its real-context, it is a reality and many myths that are yet to be broken. It is the adherence to high quality standards, creating awareness and increasing the distribution of ayurvedic products, combined with the efforts of healthcare providers and major pharmaceutical companies by incorporating ayurvedic medicines in their mainstream activities, that will dispel the myths associated with ayurveda.

With the rising popularity of Ayurveda, there is an increase in consumer interest in the processes and formulations of this medicinal system. In context of the stringent manufacturing

norms followed by the Western system of medicine, there is a demand for higher quality standards in ayurveda as well.

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