

BOOK REVIEW -**Inside Ciba-Geigy by Olle Hansson**

International Organisation of Consumers Unions, (IOCU) pp. 240, price Rs. 85.

This is a remarkable book by a remarkable physician who single-handedly challenged the might of a large multinational pharmaceutical company on the unethical practice of continuing to market one of its most lucrative drugs long after its unacceptable lack of safety was demonstrated. The company was Ciba-Geigy and the drug clioquinol, an oxyquinolone derivative, an anti-diarrhoeal preparation, marketed under the brand name, Enterovioform.

In waging his lone and long battle, Dr Olle Hansson, a Swedish physician at Gothenburg, exploded the myth, yet again, that pharmaceutical companies would not suppress serious toxicological evidence, i.e. dangerous side effects, of their drugs to make profit at all costs. Ciba-Geigy's adamant refusal to acknowledge the serious adverse reactions of Enterovioform and Dr Hansson's persistent efforts to get the drug withdrawn from the international marketplace after much research on the side effects of the drug which commenced with his observation of a probable cause-effect relationship in one of his patients, will go down in medical history as an epic confrontation where right ultimately prevailed over might. The fact that it took as long as it did is an indictment of the code of conduct of the pharmaceutical industry, the malaise of the drug regulatory authorities and, in the ultimate analysis, the inability of the medical profession to pay urgent heed to the gallant efforts of one of its dedicated members.

The painful story of the severe and irreversible neurological side effects of clioquinol took much longer to unravel than the dramatic thalidomide tragedy because it lacked the intensively emotive element of the thalidomide-induced deformities in newborn infants. Eventually, after almost four decades, the epidemic of cases of clioquinol-induced

subacute myelo-optic neuropathy (SMON), i.e. degenerative changes in the optic and peripheral nerves and spinal cord, in Japan, put paid to Ciba-Geigy's slick attempts to cover up evidence that had existed in the company's files for many a long year. Meanwhile, more than 11,000 people's lives lay in waste, crippled by the adverse reactions of clioquinol.

Tragically, Dr Hansson died before completing his book but he had already done yeoman service to millions of hapless consumers the world over, particularly in the developing countries where drugs and drug combinations of dubious value, many utterly useless and some downright dangerous, continue to be marketed and prescribed to this day. *Inside Ciba-Geigy* was completed by Milton Silverman, a journalist, based on his discussions with the senior management of the company and his involvement in negotiations for victims afflicted with SMON.

This book is well produced and easy to read. It should be in the library of every medical college and must be compulsory reading for every doctor, every medical student and every pharmacist. All of us, members of the medical profession and the lay public in India and the rest of the world, owe a deep debt of gratitude to Dr Hansson who epitomised the virtues of a good clinician and clinical researcher – courage, concern, curiosity, dedication and a determination to pursue truth against almost insurmountable odds. He will be remembered for much longer than those who tried unsuccessfully to thwart him. More importantly, as a tribute to his memory, we should not allow anything like SMON to occur again.

G. N. Menon