

Accountability in medical research

Paintal's essay advocating accountability in medical research (*Curr. Sci.*, 1994, 66, 905) was long overdue. We expected such thoughts and actions based on them during his career as a researcher and especially during his term as Director of India's watchdog body on medical research.

His emphasis on ethics committees in all medical institutions conducting research is well placed. It is a sorry fact that few institutes have cared to set up such committees. Even in these few organizations, the functioning of ethics committees leaves much to be desired. A scrutiny of the proportion of research projects in the institute actually submitted to the ethics committee, the manner in which such submissions are made, the procedure by which they are analysed, checks on implementation (as, for example, the manner in which informed consent is actually obtained) and followup on the findings and their analysis would yield findings that will shock many.

We are witness to projects with inherent basic faults. Implants (containing drugs that are released slowly) are inserted into patients without any mechanism for tracing defaulters being set up. The complications, if any, in such defaulters will remain unknown to the researchers. Worse, the subjects suffering such complications will obtain neither relief nor compensation.

In his very first paragraph Paintal refers to another defect which is not at all

uncommon. When an individual of the stature of Paintal confesses that 'in one instance, I almost approved the drug owing to the pressure applied from various sources' (page 905), it is easy to reckon the consequences of the frailties of others not as well endowed with position or power. It is a pity that Paintal is not willing to expose these sources.

He also refers to the conduct of a clinical trial of a vaccine despite the fact that harmful effects were predicted. Who proposed such a study and, more important, who provided the green signal?

Coming from the ex-Director-General of the Indian Council of Medical Research who has represented this country on several international committees, his statement to the Government of the United States of America should make us hang our heads in shame. 'It is unfortunate that certain Indian scientists well known for being unscrupulous or guilty of gross scientific misconduct were supported in the past by certain agencies and highly influential scientists... This support... is now causing serious problems in India... Indian authorities now seem powerless in taking punitive action against individuals guilty of gross scientific misconduct...' (page 905). Who are these individuals in India and who were their protective godfathers in America and Europe? And who are these powerless Indian authorities?

Why this exasperating evasion? When Paintal is willing to strike, why is he refraining from wounding—if need be, mortally—such undesirables?

His query as to who is to be held accountable for the undesirable side-effects from medical drug trials is naive. Whilst the principal investigator/s must bear the brunt of the disgrace and pay the price, those who had approved the trial in the face of evident potential for harm cannot but share the penalty.

I can understand the frustration within a young scientist, when he witnesses corruption and scandal in medical research. When an individual such as Paintal, who has wielded great power, assails the political patronage of unscrupulous scientists (page 906) one cannot help asking, 'What were you doing when you were at those dizzying heights, laying down policy and guiding our politicians?' Coming from him, the suggestion that the ICMR should have developed yardsticks for holding individual scientists and chairmen of committees accountable sounds very very strange.

Or is he also one of the lotus eaters he so blithely criticizes (page 907)?

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Indian planetary theory

The comment appearing with our article 'Modification of the earlier Indian planetary theory...' (*Curr. Sci.*, 1994, 66, 784) generates unnecessary ambiguities.

The Kerala school of astronomy did not constitute any 'clean break' with the Indian astronomical tradition, and therefore the question of this break hinging on 'some subtle points of interpretation of the original texts' does not arise. The article is not about any discontinuity in

the Indian astronomical tradition. On the other hand what we point out is that the continuous efforts to improve upon calculational efficiency and accuracy, which lie at the core of Indian astronomical tradition, led the Kerala astronomers in the fifteenth century to arrive at a calculational scheme in which the five extra-terrestrial planets seem to go around the Sun. The geometrical model implied by the calculational scheme and the movement of the five planets around the Sun

in such a model is explicitly described in the original text of Nilakantha, and there is no interpretation involved in this.

What may be a matter of interpretation is whether this scheme constitutes a 'true' heliocentric model in the sense it appeared in the western astronomical tradition. That may be a very subtle question to be resolved by the historians of western astronomy: our article is not about settling questions of priority on the so-called