Sir Ram Nath Chopra (1882-1973)

Parag D Dashatwar

Sir Ram Nath Chopra was a distinguished pharmacologist and a visionary who is credited with development of experimental pharmacology in India in early 1920s.

Chopra obtained his MD medicine degree while working under W.E. Dixon very first professor of pharmacology at University of Cambridge. He returned to India in 1908 and joined Indian Medical Services. He was colonel in Indian Army that served on East Africa front in First World War and in Afghan war of 1919. In 1921, Chopra was appointed as first professor of Pharmacology at newly established Calcutta School Of Tropical Medicine while simultaneously heading department of Pharmacology at Calcutta Medical College. During his tenure at these institutes he nurtured a pool of talented pharmacologists. He encouraged need based research approach among his students.

He undertook systematic study of indigenous drugs of India. He tried to put Ayurveda and other indigenous systems of medicine on scientific footing by carrying out scientific studies of drugs mentioned in these systems. His aim was to make Indian pharmacology self-supporting by enabling India to utilise locally produced drugs. He succeeded in this monumental task by collaborating with people from allied disciplines such as chemists and botanists. His omnibus publication Indigenous Drugs of India still remains most important source material on this topic. One of his better-known works is his study of herb Rauwolfia serpentina or the Sarpagandha of Ayurveda.

He compiled first Indian pharmacopoeia in 1955 comprising many indigenous drugs he studied at school of Tropical Medicine. He also developed Chopra's antimony test for diagnosis of Leishmaniasis, which is particularly useful in resources crunched rural India.

He also served as a director of Biological Standardisation Laboratory Of India and as member of Drug Enquiry Committee in 1930 to standardise drug manufacturing and formulate ways to curb adulteration. He strongly pushed for legislative action against adulteration and as a result of his efforts The Drug Act 1940 came into effect. He also headed Regional Research Laboratory at Jammu. In post-independence period he was instrumental in establishment of National Drug Research Institute at Lucknow (now CDRI).

Among many honours Chopra earned in his lifetime were Minto Gold Medal, Squibb Award and Kaiser-e-Hind gold medal. He was knighted in 1941. Chopra not only pioneered in herbal drug research but also paved path for future generations.

Addendum

- Chopra indirectly gave the world its first valuable anti-hypertensive drug. On the basis of his work, Dr. Rustom Jal Vakil did extensive clinical research in Bombay and published his paper on Serpentina, in British Heart Journal (1948). These results were widely acclaimed and internationally accepted.

*Notes on Vakil & Sarpagandha Stamp

Courtesy : JV Paidhungat

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