Dr K. V. Desikan gets the Damien–Dutton Award

Dr K. V. Desikan, Emeritus Professor of Pathology at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, Sevagram (Maharashtra) and Director, LEPR-A-India, received the Damien–Dutton Award for the year 2000—the highest international recognition for work in leprosy. The award is named after two priests, Fathers Damien and Dutton, who sacrificed their lives for leprosy patients. The Damien–Dutton Society in the USA instituted the award in 1953. Stanley Stein, a leprosy patient, who fought for human rights for victims of leprosy, was the first recipient of this annual award. Dr Desikan now joins a long list of illustrious recipients, which includes Dr Dharmendra, Mother Teresa and John F. Kennedy.

Dr Desikan has completed 50 years of work in leprosy. While doing his MD (Pathology) from Christian Medical College, Vellore, he carried out the largest series of autopsy studies on leprosy patients. He then decided to devote his entire life to research (over 150 publications based on clinical, histopathological and immunological work in leprosy) and field work in leprosy. His original work on SET (survey, education and treatment) was the basis of the national as well as global leprosy control programmes. As Chairman and Medical Consultant to the Indian branch of LEPR-A, he organized leprosy control programmes in vast, hilly tribal areas of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

The President of the International Leprosy Association, Dr Wayne Meyers, conferred the award on him on 11 November 2000 at the Asian Leprosy Congress in Agra. The award consisted of a medallion and a bronze plaque embedded in wood with an inscribed citation. Dr Wayne Meyers, representing the board of the Damien–Dutton Society for Leprosy spoke about how Dr Desikan dedicated his life to bring to ‘God’s poorest of the poor’ a sense of self-worth. He admired Dr Desikan for his untiring efforts to provide treatment at the doorsteps of a very large number of patients. Dr Desikan’s response was characteristically humble: ‘I feel honoured, but I have to remind myself that I am no greater than several others who have worked, struggled, sacrificed and remained unknown.’

S. P. KALANTRI, Sevagram

Question papers ‘leak’ in Mumbai

Mumbai’s J.J. Hospital and Grant Medical College, one of the oldest and most prestigious medical institutions in India, was back in the news for the wrong reasons. This time it was the ‘leakage’ of the final MB.BS examination papers. A few hours before the commencement of a theory examination, a student was found in possession of the question paper, in a photocopy shop on the hospital campus. Somebody blew the whistle and the student confessed to having obtained the same from a peon who in turn led the police to Dr Bhusale, Professor of Forensic Medicine and also chief invigilator for the examination. This gentleman had once officiated as the assistant dean of the hospital. More names soon tumbled out from what seemed to be an organized ring of doctors, ex-students living in the hostels and intermediaries such as peons, who would deliver the question paper to students for a price. An Associate Professor of Urology, who is also the warden of the student’s hostel, Dr Bhawani was arrested too. In a turn of events that showed that our fraternity is learning a trick or two from politicians, both reported sick and got themselves admitted to the cardiology and nephrology wards, respectively. The police, however, seemed determined and are probing further. Dr Joy Ohri, previously associated with the hospital and the General Secretary of the students’ association, Mayuresh Pradhan, have also been arrested. The new Vice Chancellor of Mumbai University, Dr Bhalchandra Mungekar, promptly ordered an inquiry into the whole episode.

Not many amongst Mumbai’s medical circles were surprised as stories about such leaks of medical examination papers are unfortunately heard very regularly. For J.J. Hospital, though, this is yet another addition in a list of scams that have plagued it in the last few decades.

SANJAY NAGRAL, Mumbai

Comments in Hyderabad

A series of incidents recently reported from Vijayawada raise serious concerns regarding the attrition of ethical values in medical practice. A 23-year-old woman lodged a complaint against doctors for allegedly deceiving her that they had made her conceive through micro-assisted fertilization [intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI)] and fleeced her to the tune of more than Rs 200 000.

Attracted by an advertisement on television about a ‘Test Tube Centre’, she and her husband, a lorry driver, approached the doctors at the centre. She underwent tests and ICSI treatment and, based on an ultrasound scan report, was told by the doctors that she had conceived. Later, when the patient developed bleeding, she sought an alternative opinion and was told that she had never conceived in the first place. It turned out that the director of the scan centre had issued several false reports about pregnancy (including the report of this patient) at the behest of the doctors of the ‘Test Tube Centre’ and helped them deceive their patients for the preceding three months. The police are investigating the case.

In a separate incident, a scholar, claiming to be an ‘expert and a researcher on AIDS’, who had been running a ‘Homeo Clinic’, was arrested along with his assistant. The expert ‘doctor’ did not possess any qualification and was simply duping people. In yet another incident, a ‘doctor’ who was advertising ‘special treatment for AIDS patients’ was also arrested. He was allegedly scaring apparently normal persons by telling them that they had ‘AIDS’ and was administering his ‘special treatment’ to them.

It is time for the medical profession to seriously introspect; if the public loses faith in us, it will be a tragedy of unprecedented dimensions.
Missing radioactive material has been attracting attention in Hyderabad. In the first week of November there were reports of an unspecified quantity of depleted ‘uranium’ being seized by the police from two scrap merchants in the old city. The scrap dealers told the police that they had discovered the uranium tablets in a machine purchased from a hospital specializing in cancer treatment. The machine, which was believed to have been gifted by a foreign charity organization, was sold to them as it was ‘unsusable’. Immediately after the seizure, the police sought the help of experts from the Nuclear Fuel Complex (NFC) in finding out whether there was any radioactive contamination. The experts certified that there was no harmful emission and told the police that the seized material was ‘depleted’ uranium. According to the restrictions imposed by the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), hospitals are not supposed to sell cancer treatment machines to scrap dealers.

This incident closely follows another report, in August 2000, of the mysterious disappearance of the radioactive source of caesium 137 from the government-run Mehdi Nawaz Jung (MNJ) Cancer Hospital, Hyderabad. Used for treating gynaecological cancers, this source was about the size of a small thin pencil, 16 mm long and 3 mm wide and had 73 milliCuries of radioactivity. The source went missing in June, but the hospital authorities kept it under tight wraps fearing a public outcry. Desperate, the hospital authorities and scientists frantically searched municipal garbage bins and drainage sewers in the city. As the source was not traced, the authorities informed BARC who rushed two teams headed by senior officials to Hyderabad to try and trace the source. Even these teams drew a blank. The Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) was informed of the missing radiation source. After a series of meetings, the AERB finally decided to shut down the brachytherapy unit at the hospital. Later, the hospital was given permission to re-start the service after the hospital authorities gave an undertaking that they would strictly follow a protocol for handling radioactive material and avoid mishaps.

Hospitals handling radioactive sources need to tighten their security and diligently adhere to the prescribed protocols of safety precautions. If they cannot, they should be closed down as they can constitute a major threat to the health of the public.