

OBITUARY



Colonel Sir Ram Nath Chopra formerly Professor of Pharmacology and Director, Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine and Director, Regional Drug Research Laboratory, Jammu passed away on the morning of June 13, 1973 at Srinagar. Professor Chopra will long be remembered as the father of Pharmacology in India for the development of Pharmacology as a separate discipline in India owes much to his dynamic leadership.

Born in 1882, Professor Chopra graduated from Punjab University and went to Downing College at Cambridge, taking the Science Tripos in 1905. He obtained his L.R.C.P. and M.R.C.S. (Eng.) in 1905, M.B., Ch. B. (Cantab.) in 1908 and M.D. in 1912. During his training at the St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London, he sat for the competitive examination for the Indian Medical Service, coming out third. He served for a few years in the Army, and thereafter joined the School of Tropical Medicine in 1921 as the Professor of Pharmacology.

Professor Chopra spent the next twenty years - an exceptionally active and fruitful period - at the School of Tropical Medicine. At that time, pharmacology as a separate discipline, as distinct from the undergraduate curriculum of "Materia Medica" virtually did not exist in India. The experimental approach to pharmacology, common today in India, was practically unknown. In the face of many difficulties including the lack of an organisational basis to undertake this task, the young Professor Chopra set to organising a modern and efficient experimental pharmacology laboratory with the energy and drive characteristic of him. The slogan of need-based research was not current in those days.

It needs to be remembered that Professor Chopra, nearly fifty years ago at the School of Tropical Medicine had chosen to spend the major portion of his effort on a need-based topical problem, i.e. pharmacological analysis of Indian Indigenous Drugs. At that time, no systematic study of Indian Indigenous drugs had been attempted with modern scientific methods. He took up a study of their chemical composition, pharmacodynamics, toxicity and therapeutic uses. These resulted in over 200 publications during his years in the School of Tropical Medicine. Professor Chopra had undertaken another monumental task in this connection : It was nothing less

than a methodical compilation of the various medicinal plants of India, botanical data, vernacular synonyms, chemical constituents, pharmacological actions elicited by modern scientific methods and therapeutic activity ascribed to the plant and its products. His books in this field still remain the most important compilation of source material. They also serve to indicate the amount of labour willingly undertaken, as well as his perseverance and mental lucidity. He was successful in instituting fruitful collaboration with chemists, botanists and leading exponents of Ayurvedic and Unani medicine. In retrospect, one can see what may perhaps be called a grand design in his work on indigenous drugs: to collate therapeutic claims made by practitioners of indigenous systems of medicine; to match it with botanical and chemical data; to evaluate indigenous drugs by modern pharmacological technique; to develop cheap and efficacious drugs; and to prepare an Indian Pharmacopoeia. Almost all his work fitted into this scheme of things.

Professor Chopra served as Chairman of the Drugs Enquiry Committee appointed by the Government of India in 1930. He travelled all over India in this connection and put in a great deal of labour. The Report of this Committee ultimately served as the basis of the subsequent Drugs Act and Pharmacy Act for the forties. He served ably on a number of other important committees.

On retirement from the School of Tropical Medicine, Professor Chopra took up the appointment of Director of Medical Services & Drug Research in Jammu and Kashmir State. For the next twenty years he served in that area, and was largely instrumental in the establishment of the CSIR Regional Research Laboratory at Jammu.

Professor Chopra had the rare gift of welding a number of people into an enthusiastic and collaborative team, and getting the best out of them, both individually and collectively. He is remembered by the oldtimers in the School of Tropical Medicine as an exacting, but kind and considerate taskmaster. He built up around him a band of able and enthusiastic workers, many of whom later became leaders in Pharmacology in India. In this, his role was akin to that of John Jacob Abel in the development of a generation of pharmacologists in the U.S.

Professor Chopra had acquired a large number of academic and public distinctions. These included, apart from M.D. and Sc.D. (Cantab.), Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians of London, Fellowship of the National Academy of Sciences, Academy of Medical Sciences, Knighthood, Kaiser-i-Hind Gold Medal, and the award of C.I.E. He received several medals and prizes for research and was elected to different British, German and American Societies in recognition of his scientific eminence. Those who came in contact will always remember him as a genial and kindly friend, suave and soft-spoken a gentlemen to the core.

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