

Problems in Documenting EP Drugs Campaign

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THE two articles on high-dose EP combination published in *RJH* Vol II, no. 3 do not aim at giving an account of the movement to ban this hazardous drug-combination. But there are certain inadequate or inaccurate statements about the same. This response is to correct the unintentional misleading impression created by these statements.

A few activists and journalists belonging to health and consumer groups had gathered in Pune in January, 1983 to discuss and chalk out an action-plan on mutually agreed issues. In this discussion it was decided to take up a campaign against high-dose EP combination. The technical, background material was then prepared by Mira Shiva and Satyamala of Voluntary Health Association of India. V.S. Mathur, Professor of Pharmacology at the post-Graduate Institute of Chandigarh, prepared a 'dear doctor' letter. This was circulated amongst different health, consumer, women's groups and signature-campaign was undertaken. We requested women's groups to include the demand for a ban on this combination, in the list of demands on the International Women's Day March 8 that year. We also managed to get articles published in news papers all over India on March 8 (which was incidentally a Sunday) arguing for a ban on this combination. This was followed up with representations to the concerned authorities.

The second source of determined opposition was in the form of petition in Supreme Court by Vincent Pannikulangara against the continued use of a number of hazardous drugs including high-dose EP combination. The Supreme Court ruling on this petition resulted in the public enquiry.

Thirdly, an article in the *Onlooker* published from Madras, claimed that Palaniappan from Madras has reported a very high incidence of congenital anomalies consequent to the administration of high-dose EP combination to pregnant women. There was a lot of uproar on this issue after this article. Questions were raised in the Parliament.

As a consequence of this determined opposition from different sectors, the Government requested the Indian Council of Medical Research to give its opinion about this issue once again. (Earlier, ICMR had said that there is no need to ban this product; only a warning be given along with the product that it should not be used in pregnancy.) We had argued that this warning, was not going to stop the misuse of this drug. Since there was no scientific indication whatsoever for the use of this combination, consumers would not be deprived of anything if this hazardous combination was banned. This second committee of ICMR also

recommended its total ban. It is thus not correct to say that the use of high-dose EP combination "has created such havoc that the victims, i.e. some of the women, could not bear it any longer. Their protests led to the banning of the drug."

The relative success of the campaign on this issue in 1983 was one of the important factors responsible for the continuation of this networking that had taken shape around this issue. The All-India Drug Action Network, consisting of around a dozen health, and consumer groups, was born and continued to follow-up the demand for a ban on high-dose EP combination.

In the public hearings on high dose EP combination, member-organisations of All-India Drug Action Network have played a significant role. The method of publishing the notice about the public hearings in an inconspicuous manner and not informing the concerned action groups was severely criticised. So also the reported decision of the Drug Controller to stop the hearings after the Calcutta hearing. Fraternal organizations outside AIDAN, like FMRAI and Health Service Association of West Bengal also put up a lot of pressure on this issue. As a result of these efforts from different groups, the Drugs Controller had to decide to hold hearings in Calcutta and Bombay and had to send invitation-notices about these public hearings in Calcutta and Bombay to all the concerned groups. Mira Shiva (VHAI), Satyamala (MFC), Vishwas Rane (Arogya Dakshata Mandal), Amit Sen Gupta (Delhi Science Forum) gave a valiant fight at the Delhi hearing even though the pro-EP forte lobby was in the majority, had a few prestigious gynaecologists on their side. All these organisations are members of AIDAN. In the Bombay-hearing also ACASH, ADM, MFC, LOCOST—(all members of AIDAN) along with other similar groups presented a solid technical case against high dose E.P. combination, whereas various women's groups presented a social critique of the continued use of this combination against the interests of women. Amitav Guha's article, unintentionally glosses over the role of AIDAN in this movement.

The movement against high dose EP combination thus does not follow a classic pattern. It was not initiated by any women's group, nor did the women's group consistently follow up this issue, or took a lead in it. A lawyer. (Pannikulangara), a journalist of *Onlooker*, a few committed health-activists from certain health-action groups (some of which are incidentally foreign-funded) played at least as important a role as women's groups or the trade union FMRAI, alongwith many others, did AIDAN remained the