NUTRACEUTICALS - AN ILLUSIVE POT OF GOLD AT RAINBOW END?

In India we are blessed. We have traditional folk medicines, home remedies, besides herbals, Ayurveda, homeopathy and allopathy options, and now the in-roads made by nutraceuticals. The consumer is spoilt for choices and the healthcare providers are flummoxed by the options. What started off as another alternative option, nutraceuticals is fast becoming accepted as a bridge between 'naturals' and drugs. It would be interesting to historically assess how our forefathers have been undergoing treatment down the ages.

- 10000 BC onwards: Era of Siddha system of Medicine
- 3000 BC onwards: Era of Herbals
- 2000 BC onwards: Era of traditional Chinese systems of Medicine
- 1500 BC onwards: Era of Traditional Medicine
- 500 BC onwards: Era of Unani & Sowa-Rigpa (Tibetan or 'Amchi') Medicines
- 300 BC onwards: Era of Ayurveda
- 1700 AD onwards: Era of Homeopathy
- 1800 AD onwards: Era of Allopathy
- **1900 AD onwards: Era of Nutraceuticals**

Nutraceuticals are biologicals and botanicals laced with science! The global Nutraceutical Market is USD \$ 300-400 bn and India currently has only 1% slice of the same! Surprisingly Indian Pharmaceutical Market also constitutes mere 2% share of the global drug sales! Then where is the gap? A typical Indian family incurs Rs 50,000/- per year expenses on medical costs but only Rs 2,000 yearly is spent on nutraceuticals – 10 times lesser than global average! The average Indian spend ratio for Nutraceuticals is 4% in comparison to Pharmaceuticals versus global proportion of 7%! Therein lies the immediate potential for nutraceuticals.

The nutraceuticals market in India has penetrated just above 10% at all India level – it is albeit 3.5 times bigger in Urban versus Rural India. If the Indian Nutraceutical Market, like global, is to touch 7% of the Pharmaceutical Market the need is to increase penetration to 15% at all-country level and enhance spend for nutraceuticals from current Rs 175/- per month to mere Rs 225/- per month.

Possible to increase reach by 5% and further enhance spend by Rs 50/- per month in India?? Yes – but a thorny path to tread ahead. WHY? I have journeyed through the Nutraceutical vertical of healthcare thus far right from its starting point which is late 1980s. When I commenced my association with Nutraceuticals, there was a mere trickling of nutraceuticals introduced through the 1990s. The market was ignited in the first decade of 21st century when the Pharmaceutical Companies mass-scaled forayed into nutraceuticals; 2010 onwards the products multiplied in all possible channels of distribution when other than the pharmaceutical organizations surfaced. So much so, that today India is responsible for one out of every five nutraceutical launches of in Asia! Then why have the Indians not yet whole-heartedly embraced nutraceuticals? Marketing nutraceuticals in India is not an easy task – challenges being dependence on Dr for their buy-decision, ill-literacy, lack of awareness amongst medical professionals for nutraceuticals, reluctance to advice and spend for preventive health are prime contributory factors. Some of the following aspects pertaining to successful nutraceutical marketing could tip the scale, if addressed.

- Companies need to be more focused on unleashing the benefits of nutraceuticals rather than on sales. For example, zinc boosts immunity and has antiviral activity albeit as acetate and gluconate salts. However, most brands have sulphate and citrate salts which have no such advantages -how are these expected to really deliver value in coronavirus pandemic? Check your antibodies to ascertain.

- Regulators require in their committees knowledgeable professionals and not famed personalities or self-proclaimed experts. Regulators are on unsteady grounds with regards to evaluating nutraceuticals. The DTAB Committee which last evaluated irrational products banished all zinc containing anti-cold formulations questioning its antiviral benefit. Today, vitamin C and zinc are in limelight for their immunity-building benefits! In a current matter of confusion, the FSSAI regulators of a particular state have proclaimed that whether it is cyanocobalamin or methylcobalamin the RDA is same as for vitamin B₁₂! How can one expect to deliver benefits with homeopathic quantities of methylcobalamin being enforced?
- Companies should provide beneficial content of nutraceuticals even if the product becomes dearer. In the case of coenzyme Q₁₀ (CoQ₁₀), an expensive ingredient, the brands claim all its benefits whilst providing a mere fraction of minimum 100 mg required per daily serving! Repeat purchase can only be a pipedream.
- Nutraceuticals are for life-style and not for organ-health. The consumer needs nutraceuticals to prevent fractures, maintain painless joints movements, ward off cancer, diabetes and heart disease, etc. They do not desire ingredients – he / she wants recipes. Making single ingredient nutraceuticals available like calcium, folic acid, ashwagandha, grape seed extract, etc. is akin to running a grocery shop! The knowledge-challenged buyer prefers refraining from purchasing amongst confusing choices.

The current FSSAI regulations do not throttle nutraceuticals. They provide ample scope of facilitating the globally projected growth of nutraceuticals equalling 30% of Pharma market. The already cluttered market of nutritional products (vitamins-minerals-proteins) should not be confused as nutraceuticals. The mantra should be: launch nutraceuticals (not nutritional), conceptualize beneficial combo with optimal amounts, incorporate best ingredient form and ensure 'scientific' promotional messages. Only then will positive health be a stark reality and a Rs 2250 bn golden pot at rainbow end be snatched before 2030 – corona permitting!

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About The Guest Editor

Dr R K Sanghavi is Mumbai-based privately Consulting Physician since 40 years, who served in Ramakrishna Mission Hospital and many other charitable institutions. He has consulted Ethical & OTC verticals of Healthcare Industry in domains of Medico-Marketing, Training & Dr-lecturing (CMEs), Techno-Legal & Regulatory, and is member of the Subject Review Committee of NFI. Dr Sanghavi has near 200 company-years of exposure, experience and expertise by virtue of advising over 80 small, medium and large Pharma companies, including MNCs. Notable clients have been Themis, Khandelwal, Sun, FDC, Blue Cross, Biochem, Aglowmed, Svizera, Medreich, Abbott and Mankind (in chronological order). He takes credit in pioneering the Nutraceutical vertical of Healthcare in India and was associated in 1990s with first launch of most nutraceutical ingredients (antioxidants, glucosamine-chondroitin, omega-3 fatty acids, evening primrose oil, CoQ₁₀, phytoestrogens, phospholipids, soluble fiber, St John's Wort, etc.) which have wide acceptance - having delivered near 300 lectures in India including overseas Dr CMEs. As Chairman of IDMA's Medical Committee for 15 years Dr Sanghavi had organized 20 conferences; he is currently chairing the Nutraceutical Committee since last one decade. Dr Sanghavi has successfully represented IDMA on all six occasions in various High Courts, and in Supreme Court, pertaining to banning of irrational FDCs (CDSCO) and implementation of an unjustifiable system of Product Approval for nutraceuticals (FSSAI).

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