RATIONAL USE

Sri Lankan students campaign for rational medicine: the story of SRHIA

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This second article in our series on organizations concerned with rational drug use features a very different group from the long established Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association described in EDM-15. Today we look at the work of SRHIA (Students Involved in Rational Health Activities), a young and relatively unknown organization. However, its members believe that even in this formative stage of their lives, they have a voice that needs to be heard, coupled with a commitment to promote change towards a more rational use of resources and people centred health care.

Students in general, and medical students in particular, often have a "boredom of the issue" approach – more intent on getting through their studies and passing demanding professional examinations than questioning or trying to change the status quo. This attitude is perhaps understandable and yet modern medicine cannot be studied in a scientific vacuum, but has to be part of the much broader public health perspective. Intrinsically linked to disease prevention, treatment and cure, are issues of resource priority, accessibility of services and medicines, community empowerment, the availability of objective information, and the control of drug quality, use and marketing.

Until recently there has been little student involvement in promoting health activities and people oriented health care in Sri Lanka. Why? Perhaps a vital link was missing.

This missing link was provided by the IUCU Asia-Pacific Workshop on Pharmacovigilance for Health Ministry Officials held in Colombo in June 1992. A number of Sri Lankan medical students were observers at the meeting and also used the informal discussions that took place out of seminar hours to increase their knowledge of issues related to rational health care. Stimulated by the concerns and issues raised, and pharmaceutical policies evolving in different countries of the region, the students decided that they wanted an active role that would enable them to raise awareness and participate in action on health care issues in their own country of Sri Lanka. One month later the new group, entitled Students Involved in Rational Health Activities (SRHIA), was officially established.

From its inception, SRHIA has tried to concise concretely the existing health care system. SRHIA is not ready to accept things as they are, but wishes to participate in identifying and working towards what they should be. It argues that if the situation cannot be changed immediately, it can at least be questioned and improved.

Increasing the awareness of the concept of rational health care among medical students started with information collection on the subject. Generous contributions were made by the Health Action International (HAI) office in Amsterdam and the WHO Action Programme in Geneva. These publications have formed the nucleus of our mini library, which is extensively consulted. Our advisory body consists of members of the academic staff of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, who are also the leading advocates of health care reform in the country.

The organization has been very active in its short existence. One of the first events was a seminar on "rational therapeutics", organized by SRHIA for the medical students. SRHIA presented case histories of inappropriate drug treatment and invited clinicians and academicians to discuss them.

Members participated in a panel discussion organized by the International Advertisers’ Association to discuss the level of control that should be applied to medicinal drug advertising. We expressed our views vigorously, radiating many critical issues. This was probably the first time that the voice of students had been heard during a meeting on drug promotion.

One of the major events in our first year was a seminar "How to facilitate the provision of low cost quality drugs based on rational prescriptions to all Sri Lankan consumers", organized in collaboration with the Ceylon Medical Journal and the Organization to Safeguard Life and Environment. The group consisted of government officials, including the Director-General of Health Services and the Chairmen of the State Pharmaceuticals Corporation. Participants included academics, clinicians, policy makers, the media, pharmacists and medical students. Drug registration, tenders, local manufacture, quality assurance, distribution and pricing were discussed at the seminar by the resource group. During the plenary session specific targets to achieve the workshop’s objectives were identified for various groups, and an action plan is now being drafted.

In February a "pharmaceutical guerrilla attack" was carried out by SRHIA members at the annual meeting of the Sri Lankan Medical Association, attended by academics, clinicians and other health care professionals. Many pharmaceutical companies have promotional stalls at this venue. On the first day SRHIA members collected examples of promotional material on display. Some inappropriate statements on several products were chosen for "attack" and a leaflet was prepared containing these statements and comparing them with the text of internationally recognised standard works of reference. The leaflets were then distributed to the meeting participants.

One of the advertisements was the subject of the Medical Lobby for Appropriately Licensed (MALAL) letter. This advertisement was used in a similar leaflet by MALAL in August 1993.

We have also taken steps to prevent misleading and misleading advertising of health related products in the mass media, and have already been instrumental in bringing about the withdrawal of an advertisement containing misleading and unsubstantiated claims by one leading multinational company operating in Sri Lanka. We consider that action is badly needed in this area which has been neglected for many decades. Unfortunately, there are numerous examples of misleading advertising.

One recent SRHIA activity was the widely publicised complaint we submitted to the People’s Tribunal (Mahajana Vikalpa Vishisheeya Mandalaaya - MVVM) on the current situation of pharmaceutical pricing, medical promotion and the availability of an irrationally large number of me-too drugs in this country. The MVVM is an independent tribunal consisting of professionals, academics and other eminent persons in public life. Although it has no legal status it examines matters of public interest and places its verdict before the public, backed by its considerable moral authority. The Tribunal concluded that the complaint was well founded and strongly recommended that the regulations of the Sri Lanka Medical Council be altered to rectify this alarming situation before it is implemented without delay.

In July and August this year, we also held seminars on the pharmaceutical industry for the students at the Faculties of Medicine at Galle and Ragama, which were attended by a large number of students as well as members of the academic staff. Currently some of our members are reviewing pharmaceutical practices in Sri Lanka. They have already found some advertisements which are not acceptable under any circumstances and these findings will soon be published.

We do not live in an ideal world and it is increasingly apparent that this type of campaigning approach to health care is not welcomed in many quarters. On the other hand, SRHIA has been able to establish sound relationships with many interested organizations, both local and overseas. These include the WHO Drug Action Programme, Health Action International (HAI), Action for Rational Drugs in Asia (ARDA), the International Organization of Consumer Unions (IOCU), the Organization for Fair and Ethical Health Life and Environment (OSLEN), and the Medical Lobby for Appropriately Licensed Medicines (MALAL). MALAL has now appointed SRHIA as its associate in Sri Lanka.

Where do we go from here? We intend to continue our focus on promoting people oriented health care. We plan to publish a news bulletin on health issues, featuring academic and clinical writers and some students. Our membership consists of students with experience in journalism, which will make this undertaking easier.

We believe that we have broken new ground in Sri Lanka. It has not always been easy but we have been helped by feeling part of a global network of individual and organizations with a common goal of more equitable and rational health care. We hope not only to survive, but to strengthen our membership and activities and to expand into other faculties. We want to show that students can and should have a voice in promoting their own and the public’s right for change: rational health services and the wise use of limited resources concern us all.

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PHOTO: M. S. Jayasekara

A pre-school clinic in Colombo. SRHIA hopes its activities will contribute to better health care for all in Sri Lanka.