Modern chemistry with reference to line of descent and development of Ayurveda: An overview

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Abstract
Ayurveda is one of the oldest systems of medicine that evolved in India and has survived as a distinct entity from remote antiquity to the present day. History of medicine is a fascinating subject as it is a saga of man’s struggle against disease. As the civilization advances and as the disease pattern changes, the medical science also changes. Ayurveda is the system of medicine that evolved in India with a rationale logical foundation and it has survived as a distinct entity from remote antiquity to the present day. The fundamentals on which the Ayurveda system is based are essentially true for all times and do not change from age to age. These are based on human actors, on intrinsic causes. The origin of Ayurveda is attributed to Atharva Veda where mention is made several diseases with their treatments. There was systematic development of the science and it is called Samhita period, when a number of classical works were produced by several authors and during this period there is evidence of organized medical care. The development of a system of medicine depends on various factors; its form and content are decided by the civilization and the environment in which it is born.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Atharva Veda, Samhita period, medicine, chemistry

Introduction
Medicine is as old as life itself. The survival of the species demands that simultaneously with the appearance of disease, all living things must have also evolved the means to combat disease (Dhar, M.L et al. 1973)[6]. The higher animals are guided by instinct to seek remedies for illness in plants and herbs. Man with his superior intelligence must necessarily have extended the scope of this search for remedies. So if we discount the myth of a Garden of Eden which man had to abandon when he fell from grace, “the thousand ills that flesh is heir to” must have afflicted man from his birth and the dawn of medicine must have synchronized with the dawn of disease (Adailkan, P.G. et al. 2001)[1].

Every human society should must have developed a rudimentary system of medicine, whether based on material medica or in spells, incantations magic and rituals, which to us in this advanced age may appear meaningless (Agarwal, A., 2005) [2]. The progress from this primitive stage to a regular system of medicine has not been on the same lines everywhere. The development of a system of medicine depends on various factors; its form and content are decided by the civilization and the environment in which it is born (Chopra, R.N., 1956) [5].

Early development of Ayurveda as a complete System
Ayurveda is the system of medicine that evolved in India and has survived as a distinct entity from remote antiquity to the present day (Punarvasu Perumal, S.R., et al. 1998). It would be interesting to study the history of Ayurveda, trace its origin along with other Indian Systems of sciences and thoughts to assess its achievement and its place in the corpus of world medicine. The study of the genesis and evolution of ideas in any sciences is always interesting and often instructive. But it is not solely as an intellectual exercise that the study of Ayurveda is to be viewed. In spite of the spectacular results achieved by modern medicine, mainly through advances in the physical, chemical and natural sciences, there are vast areas of diseases which have eluded its therapeutic ambit and the study of a system of medicine that has stood the test of time may have a fruitful contribution to make in the overall alleviation of human suffering (Farnsworth, N.R., et al. 1977) [7]. The fundamentals on which the Ayurvedic system of medicine is based are essentially true for all times and do not change from age to age. These fundamentals are based on human factors on intrinsic causes, not extrinsic causes. Civilization may change, human habits may change, the environment may change but humanity remains the same (Agarwal, A., 2005) [2]. Changes in the environment, new modes of living, new avocations, all might contribute to certain modifications of a disease or the appearance of new diseases.
But disease attacks the human hot, and as long as the human being is very much the same as its ancestor, the reactions to the disease, signs and symptoms would be same (Chopra, R.N., 1956) [9]. The methods adopted to cure the disease may differ in their form but not in their essential approach It is said that the originators of the Ayurvedic system of medicine did not base their practices on the experimental method if by this it is meant that there are no record of studies in anatomy, physiology, pathology and pharmacology, the criticism is not without meaning. But the development of surgery the classifications of disease, the observations on signs and symptoms, prognosis and the descriptions of the nature, toxicity and therapeutic value of drugs as described in the literature all clearly demonstrate high level of knowledge which would not have been possible for men without the scientific approach (Adailkan, P.G. et al. 2001) [1]. One of the most things we should not lose sight of is the fact that the men who gave the system to the world were drawn from the highest intellectual and spiritual hierarchy (Rabe, T., 1997) [18]. Their motive was compassion. Their purpose as to alleviate human suffering and their recorded precepts were for their disciples whom they trained for the service of humanity. Students of chemistry will be familiar with the famous observation “Let we learn to dream; then perhaps we shall learn the truth”. We see that the experimental method has serious limitations, especially in the world of medicine (Farnsworth, N.R., et al. 1977) [7]. A medical journal of thirty years ago looks out dated and obsolete today. The so-called truths or findings given to the world yesterday with a wealth of experimental findings and statistical figures are controverted today with evidence which is no less impressive. While we should all believe in progress, we should fight the temptations to look on mere newness as a virtue (Perumal, S.R., et al. 1998). Nor should us under-rate the contributions made to human knowledge by seers endowed with intuition or some indefinable faculty that has enabled them to perceive the truth far ahead of their time.

Medicine in the Vedas and Puranas

References to medicine are found in the earliest texts including the Vedas. The legendary version of the origin of the Ayurvedic system is that Brahma reminded it to Prajapati, who handed it down to Atreya (Punarvasu Perumal, S.R., et al. 1998). In the Rig Veda there are references to the first divine physician Rudra and of how the Aswini Kumaras cured Chyavana of senility (Kaido, T.L., et al. 1997) [10]. There are number of risk addressed to Marut, Vayu etc, in which the reference to medicine is unmistakable. Although such references are found in the Rig Veda, as systematic and comprehensive treatment of medicine is to be found only in the Atharva Veda. The Atharva Veda is considered to have originated later than the Rig Veda, and contains a description of diseases and the cure of them (Rabe, T., 1997) [18]. As an example, we might cite the ancient view of the disease consumption. It was characterized as a disease of not one organ but of several organs, heart, lungs, spleen, intestines, rectum, even of the bones and marrow. This surprisingly modern view appears in the form of a prayer – the form in which medical instruction appear in Vedic literature (Mukherjee, P.K., 2003). An even greater degree of anatomical and other knowledge is displayed in certain Upanishads – particularly in the Yogapanishads, which of course belong to a later period than the Vedas. The tradition of medical knowledge is further carried during the period of the puranas. References to drugs, diseases and health care are to be found in the epics. Thus we see in the Ramayana, that expert physicians attended on kings and they were capable of preserving dead bodies (Masood, E. et al. 1997) [13].

Beginnings of Systematic Development

We shall next consider the period when systematic development can be said to have taken place. This era is associated with a few illustrious names, the first of whom is Agnivesa. The Samhita written by him which is classic which has survived to this day has been made available to the world by Caraka, a redactor (Farnsworth, N.R., et al., 1967) [8]. Historically it would appear that during Caraka’s time the Agnivesa Samhita has fallen into discourse or partly perished, and Caraka undertook the great task of restoring the work, filing up the gaps and re-writing the parts of the work, which had become obscure. This will be evident from the subscription to each chapter in which the author states that he has redone the chapter (Pratisamakrita). The work has undergone a further revision by one Dridabala: at least the last 17 chapters devoted to Cikitsa and the whole Kalpa and Siddhi stanas have been re-written by Dridabala as stated in the colophon of each chapter.

Susruta Samhita

Equal in importance to the Caraka Samhita is another treatise called Susruta Samhita. This work deals with surgical diseases, and diseases of the special organs such as the eye, ear etc. Just as by tradition Caraka Samhita is ascribed to Atreya (Punarvasu Perumal, S.R., et al. 1998). Susruta Samhita is ascribed to Dhanvantari Susruta has recorded the precepts of this puranic personage Dhanvantari, just as Agnivesa has recorded those of Atreya (Punarvasu Kaido, T.L., et al. 1997) [10]. The Dhanvantari of puranas is said to be one of the avatars of Vishnu (Masood, E. et al. 1997) [13]. A historical personage by name Divodasa is also known as Dhanvantari, being an incarnation of Dhanvantari of Puranas.

Caraka Samhita

It is not known when Agnivesa lived. The book is written partly in verse and partly in prose and the language bears a resemblance to that of the Brahmans. The text is the record of teaching by Atreya Punarvasu to his students and Agnivesa was one of them. Caraka is believed to have flourished in the sixth century B.C. There is a Hindu tradition that Caraka and author of Mahabhasya on vyakaran patanjali, are one and the same person. Many commentators, Vijnana Bhiksu, sivadasa and Bhavamisra, the author of the Bhavaprakasaka, to name a few, subscribe to this opinion (Punarvasu Kaido, T.L., et al. 1997) [10]. The student of early Sanskrit literature is often confronted with some confusion in the identity of names owing to their imprecise use by commentators.

Bhela Samita

Among the works of great aniquity must be mentioned the Bhela Samhita. The main point of interest about this work is that it was probably written by a contemporary of Agnivesa (Kamboj, V.P., 2000) [11]. It is modeled on the pattern of Agnivesa Samhita. But it is a similar book than the former. Another book which has been published is Harita Samhita, which is claimed to have been written by one Harita, another contemporary of agnivesa (Heinrich, M., 2000) [9]. The claim is incorrect and this Harita probably belongs to later times.

Astanga Samgraha and Astanga Hridaya

Next in the chronological order appeared another classical work, Vagbhata’s Ashtanga Samgraha. Vagbh beta probably

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belonged to the second century A.D. He has summarized both Caraka and Susruta and brought both medical and surgical diseases within the compass of a single treatise (Masood, E. et al. 1997) [13]. Vagbheta follows the tradition of using both prose and verse, though there is more of verse than the prose in his work (Heinrich, M., 2000) [9]. From the stand point of analytical classification arrangement and exposition he excels other writers. The Astanga samgraha is for this reason more popular than other works among students and practitioners in the South (Masood, E. et al. 1997) [13]. Vagbheta can claim to be the first author to have begun the syncretic school of bringing together information on all the branches of medicines within the ambit of a single work which as others he divided into eight parts (Astanga), and called it as such. The eight parts are general medicines, paediatrics, mental diseases, diseases of special sense organs, surgery, toxicology, gerontology and aphrodisiacs. Ayurveda is the only ancient science where care of ole is described.

The organization of medical care

Side by side with the systematic development of medicines in ancient India, there was also organized medical help in the form of hospitals and dispensaries, and a certain measure of health propaganda (Heinrich, M., 2000) [9]. During the Buddhist period, monks travelled all over the country not only preaching religion and philosophy and dispelling ignorance, but also alleviating human suffering King Asoka and his edicts are famous. But even before Asoka’s time evidence of organized medical care was seen in Caraka Samhita (Punarvasu Perumal, S.R., et al. 1998). Vivid descriptions are found about the location, building, personnel and amenities of hospital-Aturalaya, a maternity home, Sutikargriha, a nursery-sisugriha and a pharmacy (Agarwal, A., 2005) [2]. It should be remembered that Ayurveda is not the science of health. Healthful living, prevention of disease, personal and social hygiene all come under its ambit, and not merely the cure of diseases.

References