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Hahnemann – A Great Reformer in the Realm of Medical Thought

Ajoy Kumar Ghosh

70, Debitala Road, Majherpara, P. O. Ichapur- Nawabganj, Dist. 24 Pgs. [North], West Bengal,
PIN. 743144, India, Email: mail.dr.ajoy@gmail.com, Telephone no:- 9830983698

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Abstract

In the 18th century in Europe, there was a state of confusion, chaos and disorder in the domain of medical thought. At that time blood-letting, blood cleansing, use of purgatives in order to remove impurities from the body were in vogue as method of treatment. Hahnemann fought against it. Psychiatry at the end of the 18th century was in hopeless condition. Insane persons were locked up in cells and were punished as criminals. But Hahnemann's principles of treatment of mental patients were entirely new to the psychiatry of that time. Hahnemann forbade all action of violence or brutality on insane persons. Hahnemann was very much interested in psycho-analysis and psycho-therapy for the treatment of mental diseases. Hahnemann was the pioneer of modern concepts of hygiene and preventive medicine. During Hahnemann's time there was no public medical care program in Europe. Hahnemann's book "The Friend of Health" published in the year 1792, point out that his conception on hygiene and preventive medicine was far ahead of his contemporaries. The existence of ultra microscopic form of life was first suggested by Hahnemann in his article on cholera in 1831. His suggestions regarding preventive measures to be taken against the spread of epidemic diseases are not less important even today.

Keywords: Blood-letting, Mental disorder, Hygiene, Pollution, Asiatic cholera, Micro-organism.

Introduction

In the 18th century in Europe, there was a state of confusion, chaos and disorder in the domain of medical thought. Many doctors, discoverers and devisers tried to find out a way from the labyrinth. There was, however a general desire to discard the past and adopt of new ideas.

In 17th century researchers introduced an easy system that would guide the practice of medicine. Richard Wiseman (1621-1676), surgeon to Charles-II, believed in the “royal touch” as a cure for King’s evil, or scrofula. The ‘royal touch’ was a form of laying on of hands, whereby French and English monarchs would touch their subjects, regardless of social classes, with the intent to cure them of various diseases and condition, most commonly applied to people suffering from tuberculous cervical lymphadenitis (better known as scrofula or the king’s Evil)[1]. Learned English physician, Thomas Browne (1605-82) affirmed in existence of witches. [2] French philosopher Rene Descartes(1596-1650) considered human body as a machine and it functioned mechanically.[3]

Even in the 18th century, in Edinburgh, John Brown(1735-88),[4] explained his view that there were two types of diseases—one was sthenic [strong] to be treated by stimulants[e.g. alcohol] and the other was asthenic [weak] to be treated by sedatives [e.g. opium]. In Europe there were strong debates between Brownians [followers of John Brown] and Cullenians [followers of William Cullen(1710-1790), a professor of medicine of Glasgow] regarding the method of treatment in medical centers.[5] At that time blood-letting, fever remedies, tepid baths, lowering drinks, weakening diets, blood cleansing etc. were in vogue as method of treatment. Cupping, blood-letting, purgatives in the spring, and starvation cures, were believed to be all that was required to restore the balance of a disordered state of health. It was a general rule of health to perform blood-letting at least once or twice a year [Spring and Autumn], to have the digestive organs cleaned out by effective laxatives in order to remove the “impurities and acridities” from the body. [6]

Hahnemann’s fight against the wrong and harmful method of treatment existing in his time

Dr. Samuel Christian Friedrich Hahnemann [1755A.D.-1843A.D.], a German physician who invented homoeopathic system of medicine fought against the pernicious habit of blood-letting and purging, particularly prevalent in his time. He campaigned against the dangerously wrong methods of his contemporaries—on the one hand against phlebotomy, cupping, emetics, purgatives, sudorifics, suppuratives, drawing plasters etc. and on the other hand against the mixtures of medicines [the effects of which depend merely upon supposition] given internally. No doubt, the struggle of Hahnemann put an end to phlebotomy and other abuses, some decades later.[6].

Psychiatry at the end of the 18th century was in hopeless condition. ‘The asylums, usually run in connection with prisons and work houses, are generally conducted in such a way that the insane persons are insufficiently fed. They are merely kept in close confinement in order to prevent them from doing harm to one another and nothing more. Usually their malady is increased and they become incurable by accessory circumstances, or by the rough and injudicious treatment of the attendants. Insane persons were locked up like criminals in cells. The rule of the chain was accompanied by that of the whip. The attendants of both sexes, provided with various instruments for coercion and punishment; among them chains, hand-cuffs and fetters were common. In addition they had strong strips of oxide covered with leather and they made good use of them when a patient soiled himself, complained, scolded or become violent. To chastise was the order of the day’. [7]

But Hahnemann’s principles of treatment of mental patients were entirely new to the psychiatry of that time. He never allowed any insane person to be punished by blows or other painful bodily chastisement. Hahnemann forbade all action of violence or brutality on insane person. Because he considered that there could be no punishment for involuntary action. The psychic patients deserved nothing but pity and were always made worse by rough treatment. Hahnemann possessed an extra- ordinary understanding for the nervous and mental activities of his patients. Hahnemann was very much interested in psycho-analysis and psycho-therapy in certain cases to be more important, more applicable than the use of medicines. Hahnemann was far in advance of his time in this province too. [8]

Hahnemann, the pioneer of modern concepts of hygiene and preventive medicine

If we cast a glance of the existing sanitary condition during Hahnemann’s time, we will be started. That’s why Pettenkofer[1818-1901], known as the founder of the discipline of hygiene in Germany rightly said, “What was understood by hygiene in earlier day’s say in Hufeland’s times [Hufeland was a contemporary to Hahnemann] no longer applies; the former bases for health regulations have vanished in the keen analytical atmosphere of present day physiology; nothing of it has remained.” In those days of Hahnemann’s time, no drainage existed in the narrow, tortuous streets and alleys. The towns had no public arrangements for the removal and disposal of refuse and decaying matter. There was rarely a sufficient provision of good drinking water. In the low, badly- ventilated rooms, large clumsy-looking stoves gave out a stifling heat. The castles and houses of the aristocracy wealthy made shift with night stools; water had to be carried into the houses with much trouble. [9]

In England in the beginning of 19th century the steamed machinery brought an industrial revolution that gave birth to a number of big cities with over-crowded population without giving proper weight for necessary sanitary arrangements. The workers had to reside in crowded, dark,

inadequately ventilated rooms. Young children, women and old men worked for twelve to thirteen hours a day within the unhealthy environment of workshop. In effect thousands of people became the victim of life spoiling diseases. Before 1911, there was no public medical care program in England.

In this age of computer of 21st century when man has achieved a wonderful success in technology, chemistry and medical science, the well-designed, efficacious, scientific thought of modern hygiene hardly gives us a surprise. But the thought of Dr. S. Hahnemann, the founder of Homoeopathy, about Hygiene as has been reflected in his book 'The Friend of Health' published in the last decade of 18th century in 1792 A.D., when the science and technology was at its growing stage, when the existence of micro-organism like virus, bacteria, etc. were not known, overwhelm us.

The existence of ultra microscopic form of life was also first suggested by Dr. S. Hahnemann in his article on Cholera in 1831 [Appeal to thinking philanthropist respecting the mode of propagation of the Asiatic Cholera, published as a pamphlet from Leipzig on October 24, 1831] more than 50 years back of Koch's discovery of the Comma Bacillus of Cholera in 1882. In that article he concluded, "On board ships –in those confined spaces, filled with mouldy watery vapours, the cholera- miasm finds a favorable element for its multiplication, and grows into an enormously increased brood of those excessively minute ,invisible living creatures, so inimical to human life, of which the contagious matter of the cholera most probably consists." After minute observation Hahnemann came to a conclusion that the rapid spread of Asiatic Cholera was due to the presence of "millions of miasmatic animated beings." [10]

Hahnemann apprehended that the healthy environment cannot be maintained only by Govt. effort and physicians but can be maintained by organized effort of society as a whole on socio-economic level. So in the preface of 'The friend of Health' Vol-1, Published in 1792, Hahnemann wrote "If the minister of state were to possess no thorough knowledge of medical policy ,the chief municipal magistrate no accurate notion respecting the arrangement of prisons, work houses and hospitals, if the general officer were to know his hospitals only by plan, if the student who has completed his studies to bring away with him from the university no knowledge of physiology or anatomy, if the laughing girl were to enter the married state without ever having heard of a mother's duties, how unfit for their respective spheres, these persons would be." [11]

To avoid the pollution of air that we breathe, he was against burning of candles more than necessary in the closed rooms, excessive flowers in a small room, sleeping in a room where there is a store of green fruits. He suggested that the workshops will be sufficiently high, airy and clean; the trees which can prevent day light and pure air must be kept at a distance from ten to twelve spaces from the windows. [12]

The second point of physical environment on which Hahnemann emphasized was the purification of water to maintain sound health. During Hahnemann's time the source of water

supply was hopeless. At that time as described by Hahnemann himself, the inhabitants were obliged to make use of spring or rain water brought from a distance due to insufficiency of fresh water supply. For purification of this highly polluted water, Hahnemann directed to store and to filter the water before taking it. For preservation of water he advised every house-holder to keep his supply of water in casks, in which every 400 pound of water one pound of powdered wood charcoal should be thrown which posses the power of preservation of water from putrefaction and of making stale water sweet. [13]

His concept about residential environment where a man will develop physically, mentally and socially also coincides with modern concept. According to him the houses which would not be too high, must contain courtyard and a garden as broad and twice as long as house; the streets would be straight and broad; the shops for the sales of stock-fish, the manufactories and warehouses of the butchers, soap boilers, parchment makers, catgut-spinners, glue-boilers and all other traders who are engaged with animal substances that become readily decomposed must remain outside the city gates. [12]

To maintain personal hygiene, he advised to take foods and drinks in usual time and to avoid overeating, night watching, debilitating emotions, sexual excess, anger, grief and care, as also over exertion of the mind of all sorts.

But the most surprising thing is that he was not indifferent about the prisoners who are generally neglected even today. In order to avoid the health hazards in prisons, his appeal was to maintain sanitary environment within the prison. He lamented saying that ‘it is great cruelty to shut up many prisoners together without allowing at least 500 cubic feet space and air for each’.

During Hahnemann’s time, though the micro-organism had not come under microscope, Dr. Hahnemann perceived by his foresight that some minute living creatures are responsible for infectious or epidemic diseases. So he had given much importance on the highly contagious diseases so that it could not spread. He pointed out that whenever anybody in school, workhouses, in large manufactories will fall under clutches of this type of disease, he should be separated from other healthy persons. Those who have been engaged about such patient should certainly not approach others too nearly until they have changed cloths they wore for visiting. He also directed that the excreta of the patients should be carried to a long distance from residential houses; the dead body would be cremated or buried as early as possible, and after the epidemic subdued, the whole of the interior walls of the house should be thoroughly washed, the old cloths and wooden utensils used by the patients should be burnt in the open air. [14]

Not only that, Hahnemann’s lecture on mother and child health is also remarkable. In his little book ‘His Mother’ what he had advised about the way of maintaining mother’s health during pregnancy [antenatal care], after delivery[postnatal care], her education, breast feeding, child’s education etc. are invaluable and its importance has not been curbed now. “Hand-book for

Mothers or Principles on the Education of Infants”, a booklet written by Hahnemann is worth reading still today.

Conclusion

Hahnemann’s struggle and devotion for the benefit of mankind did not prove futile. Nowadays dry-cupping, leeches, blood-letting, regular purging and laxatives are out of date. The doses of remedies administered have become smaller and smaller in medicinal contents. Today, Hahnemann’s view regarding the treatment of mentally unbalanced patients is universally acknowledged as the chief factor in the treatment of insane. Hahnemann’s writing on public health and hygiene points out that he was much advance of his time. What at present have been regarded as the most up-to-date discoveries, were intuitively perceived by Hahnemann with remarkable keenness and accuracy. As time passes by, the world will realize more potently the contribution of ‘Hahnemann’ in the world of medical science.

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Authors Column



Dr. Ajoy Kumar Ghosh graduated (BHMS) in Homoeopathic Medicine and surgery from University of Calcutta in 1986. He is the author of ‘A Short History of Development of Homoeopathy in India (1810-2012)’ published by LAP, Germany in 2012. He is a regular writer in different Homoeopathic journals and News Letters published in India.

Dr. Ghosh is Secretary, the Jagaddal Noapara Homoeopathic Medical Association, West Bengal, India. He was invited by ‘Indian National Science Academy’ New Delhi for delivering a speech on the subject ‘Arrival, Development and Current Status of Homoeopathy in India’ in a symposium held on 14-15 October, 2012 at Lucknow.