

The syrup's lethal sweep continues

What protection the public have against spurious drugs?

THE toxic paracetamol syrup from the already closed down drug company Rid pharmaceuticals has been continuing with its killing spree with impunity. With the death due to renal failure of yet another child after the intake of the poisonous drug at the Dhaka Shishu Hospital, one is wont to think if there is at all any law in the country to bring such spurious drug manufacturers to book. For how is it possible that children are being made to drink the poison, even though the government issued order to withdraw it from the market more than a month ago? Is there no government body to monitor marketing of the poisonous concoction?

Killing of so many children, the latest count being 28, by a drug meant to alleviate suffering is an outrage of the highest order. It was expected by all concerned that the government would be quick to act and deal out harsh punishment to the culprits behind the crime. Unfortunately, nothing like that has happened so far. What further worries us is that the five persons including the owner of the offending pharmaceutical company against whom a Dhaka court issued arrest warrant on August 11 are still at large. It simply boggles the mind to think how the government can allow all these people to evade trial and due punishment after having committed such a grave public health offence.

One may recall here a similar case of ingesting spurious paracetamol syrup in 1992 in which 339 children died. At that time, the government action was limited only to cancelling registration of five drug companies involved in the crime. But nothing was done to punish the perpetrators of the crime, nor were the families of the victims amply compensated for the loss they had to sustain. Sad to say, one finds a similar pattern of conduct on the part of the administration even in the present case of 28 children dying after the intake of the same kind of toxic drug.

The drug administration's or the government's role, for that matter, so far is unacceptable. It must treat the so-called drug manufacturers as nothing short of the most heinous kind of perpetrators and apply the law accordingly to arrange exemplary punishment for them. Though the loss suffered by the families whose children fell victim to the spurious paracetamol syrup is irreparable, they still deserve due compensation.

It is more than high time that the government punished the producer, sellers, and the quacks who prescribe such a banned item and informed the public about their punitive action. The government ought also to take adequate steps to public satisfaction for the protection of our children and the public at large from the vicious grip of spurious drugs.

Mourning Edward Kennedy

Bengalis will recall him with gratitude

THE death of Edward Kennedy of brain cancer at the age of seventy-seven is particular cause for sorrow on the part of the people of Bangladesh. The reason why such should be our feeling is not difficult to fathom. Back in the tortuous days of our struggle for liberation from Pakistan in 1971, when Bengalis were marked out for genocide and when as many as ten million of them fled to safety in neighbouring India, Senator Kennedy took up our cause in his country and in the international arena. His support gave that certain boost to our struggle that was so necessary for us at the time. The Nixon administration, in its misplaced obsession with opening a road to ties with China through making use of Pakistan, conveniently looked the other way as the then Pakistan establishment went on eliminating Bengalis. Mr. Kennedy chose to uphold reality as it then was.

It is thus that we recall the late senator. Our gratitude to him remains as real and as substantive as it did in our twilight struggle for freedom. That apart, Senator Kennedy will for long be remembered as a politician to whom the real issues which affected people mattered. In his forty-seven year career in the US senate, he sponsored or co-sponsored close to three thousand bills, all aimed at ensuring a better life for ordinary Americans. Unlike his brothers, all of whom died young and in tragic circumstances, Edward Kennedy lived to old age. In his long life, he was able to play a role in legislation that for years to come will draw the respect of Americans to him. His reputation as a politician rests on the strong foundations he developed in the senate. And just how enviable that reputation is can be gauged from the plethora of tributes pouring in for him from all across the world.

For all his legislative accomplishments, though, Senator Kennedy lived a life marked by tragedy and blunders that could have been avoided. He saw his clan suffering in various ways. He was the victim of a plane crash, the effect of which was a painful back. And then came the blunders. The death of Mary Jo Kopechne in 1969 is a tragedy that never let go of him. And then in 1980, as President Jimmy Carter's popularity plummeted, Kennedy challenged him for the Democratic Party presidential nomination but was ultimately unable to secure it.

Warts and all, Edward Kennedy was a remarkable politician. More importantly, he was one man who all his life symbolized the liberalism which once defined politics in America. We grieve for him and pray for the salvation of his soul.

A look in time saves nine

When asked, people could readily deliver the features, which they believed should be indicative of what they wish to find. It must have come from their real life experiences. They must have seen an honest face in order to describe its features.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IN November 2008, scientists at Kent University drew the face of Britain's most trustworthy man. They compiled the image after asking people to pick features indicative of honesty, which included a round face, small nose and no facial hair. Faces with a sharp jaw and eyes wide apart were deemed untrustworthy. Some eighteen centuries ago Saint Jerome spoke of something similar to it. He said that the face was the mind's mirror.

But we also know that looks can be deceptive, that they don't always reflect what goes on inside the mind. There are people who know how to pretend, and some of them are hard to catch even without disguise. The mirror often creates distortions. The impressions of mind are cleverly suppressed to camouflage the expressions of face.

A face is thus more than an appearance. It shows not just the likeness of a person, but also tells us what he is like. Yet, what the face shows depends on how we look at it. If we are looking for an appearance, it's just an identification sign, merely a signpost distinguishing one person from another.

It's also possible to read a face like a book. For example, a person with a developed backhead is more emotional than

others and he is also more family and society oriented. The narrower the backhead means less of those features. The height of the crown indicates the idealism but more so the authority of the person. When the crown is low the person lacks in confidence to the degree that the crown is underdeveloped.

The readers can also read a person by his hair, forehead, eyes, eyebrows, nose, philtrum, mouth, chin, ears and cheeks. The scientists at Kent were trying to devise a way of effective reading that could reveal a person at a glance. For that purpose they collected those ubiquitous features, which construct the persona of trust, piecing together the jigsaw puzzle that a person wears on his face.

It means that the British are also as hard pressed as we to put together the profile of a reliable person. The way they are different from us is that they know what kind of a person they are looking for. When asked, people could readily deliver the features, which they believed should be indicative of what they wish to find. It must have come from their real life experiences. They must have seen an honest face in order to describe its features.

If asked, what kind of a description are we going to give? Do we know what shape and size of nose, ear or moustache formu-

late honesty? I have done an unscientific study myself with a sample size of ten. It would take pages to describe what they said in hesitation before they committed themselves to their answers. They could tell what honesty was, but didn't know how it looked.

40% of my sample said that they could rely on god-fearing people. 30% went for clean-shaved educated people, and 10% for an assortment of secular-minded, non-political, religious and educated folks. Another 20% said that honesty lived mostly amongst poor people, citing the example of Rupchan, the rickshaw puller who found two hundred and fifty thousand taka and virtuously returned the money to its owner.

A little experiment undertaken by WalletTest.com has thrown up the demographics of who is likely to return the money found. They dropped 100 wallets in front of hidden cameras and then observed what people did with those wallets. The results varied from face to face. 74% of total population returned the wallets, and twenty-six percent kept them. Then it varied by gender; 86% of the females and 61% of the males returned the wallets. Going by age, 56% of young people did it compared to 81% middle-aged and 88% aged people.

Not to say that the experiment is a sure-fire test of anything. But it's a rule of thumb, a position indicator that honesty doesn't have fixed features. In fact, it fluctuates amongst people, depending on gender, age, race, and nationality. So, the face of Britain's most trustworthy man may not be what the French have in their minds. Likewise, the features of an Asian face of



The Face of Honesty compiled by the scientists at Kent
Source: Timesonline, 17 November 2008.

honesty could be totally different from those of one in Africa.

In 1849, William Thompson was arrested for being a "confidence man." He asked people if they had the confidence to lend him their watches, and then walked off with those watches. Thompson was captured after a victim recognised him on the street.

In a country where no trial is guaranteed, only hope is recognition. And recognise them in advance. Look before you lend, be it money, watch or confidence. A look in time saves nine.

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Digital year

Only observance of digital year through holding seminars will not help to fulfill the promise of a Digital Bangladesh in any way. The ambitious dream for a Digital Bangladesh will remain a dream if the government cannot address the issue of power shortage and equip the people with the technology needed for using the potentialities of the digital era.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

BANGLADESH is going to observe digital year in 2011 to mark the journey to Digital Bangladesh by 2021 as emphasised by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith disclosed this recently while speaking as the chief guest at a roundtable organised by The Bangladesh Observer on "Roadmap for Digital Bangladesh."

The ministry of LGED and cooperatives has taken up an initiative for setting up union information centres (UIC) in 1,000 more unions in the line with the government's vision to build Digital Bangladesh by 2001.

Earlier governments set up such information centres in 30 unions under joint initiative of the Access to Information (A2I) Program of the prime minister's office and the National Institute of Local Government (NILG). The UNDP has been providing financial as well as technical assistance to this program.

The government's A2I program is a welcome development towards reaching

ICT facilities to the doorsteps of rural people. The connectivity that would be achieved in the process will help to advance the country by several years. The village people will easily get information about agriculture, health, education, marketing and employment from the UICs.

The government has also moved to formulate new laws empowering an authority to set up six hi-tech parks with the aim of boosting foreign investment in the information and communication technology sector. India, China, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam have already made tremendous progress in the ICT sector through establishing hi-tech parks.

The science and information technology ministry has already prepared the draft of a "Hi-tech park authority Act-2009," which stipulates formation of a high-powered body to attract foreign investment and also to manage these specialised industrial parks.

The country's lone hi-tech park, set up at an estimated cost of Tk 9.38 crore at Kaliakoir in Gazipur, is likely to be launched in December next. A US-based

ICT firm has expressed its interest to invest Tk 3 to 4 billion in the park to establish an ICT based university and a power plant and other infrastructure facilities, if the government allows it to run the park.

The Supreme Court (SC) is going to be digitalised soon. According to a newspaper report, all case-related information of the SC will be available in its website, and anyone from any part of the world will have access to it using the internet. The SC will also install five electronic display boards in its area so that the public can have information on running cases.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police is also going to install a hi-tech monitoring system in the central control room to make one-to-one contact with the on-duty police anywhere within the metropolitan area in order to make the police more efficient.

These are no doubt encouraging developments towards digitalisation of Bangladesh by 2021. But there is a sorry state of affairs in some other areas.

A recent sample survey by the planning ministry revealed that more than 88% of public offices have no officials to deal with ICT operations and 70% of the employees in government offices do not use computers. The situation is even worse in the commissions and corporations as 95% of these offices do not have ICT professionals. Digitalisation of Bangladesh will remain a distant dream if the government machinery is not properly digitalised.

The government installed a submarine cable at a cost of more than Tk 500 crore in 2005, and an impression was given that it would bring about a revolution in the ICT

sector. Sadly, more than 70% capacity of the submarine cable is unused due to lack of vision in the policy makers.

The state minister for science and information communication technology has rightly stressed the need to make the youths computer literate, and urged the teachers to groom their students to take up the challenges of the new century through using computers.

Such a call is not only very timely but is also in conformity with the government's ambitious program for a Digital Bangladesh by 2021. But the imperative for making the youths computer literate calls for availability of computers in village schools and IT trained teachers.

The digital future presents Bangladesh with vast opportunities. But the most frustrating part of it is the frail state of our power sector. Bangladesh owes Tk 30,832 crore as debt-service liabilities for the power sector only, though such huge expenditure failed to yield any improvement in the sector.

Bangladesh faces a big challenge to cope with digital revolution. Only observance of digital year through holding seminars will not help to fulfill the promise of a Digital Bangladesh in any way. The ambitious dream for a Digital Bangladesh will remain a dream if the government cannot address the issue of power shortage and equip the people with the technology needed for using the potentialities of the digital era.

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Executive power

The Knesset, the country's Parliament, elects the president in Israel. He serves a seven-year term and is subject to few of the democratic checks and balances that the prime minister faces.

KEVIN PERAINO

IN Israel, the office of the presidency is similar to the modern monarchy in England. The president, like the royal family, is largely ceremonial. Real power lies with the prime minister and Parliament. The president travels the world, greets foreign dignitaries, and, to some extent, plays the role of national entertainer. Like British sovereigns, when things go badly, he acts as a whipping boy upon whom Israelis vent their frustrations.

Presidents who are accused of misbehaving -- like Moshe Katsav, who will likely go on trial later this year on rape charges -- are flayed by Israel's version of Fleet Street like their naughty royal counterparts. Amid the running soap opera, one occasionally hears murmurs that the office is obsolete and embarrassing, and should be abolished.

All that recently changed. Israel's current president is Shimon Peres -- at 86, the Jewish state's last surviving Founding Father. Far from the retiring royal, the dean of Israel's left has stepped aggressively into the spotlight this summer. With Israel's hawkish foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, shunted aside, Peres has filled the vacuum.

The president, who took office two years ago, met with Barack Obama at the White House this spring even before Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. At Davos earlier this year, it was Peres who found himself defending the Jewish state during a contentious debate with Turkey's prime minister, Recep Erdogan.

And last week it was Peres again who announced that, after meeting with Russia's president, Dmitri Medvedev, the two had discussed the possibility of Russia scrapping its deal to provide Iran with sophisticated S-300 missiles. Where the prime minister or the foreign minister should otherwise be in charge, Peres has appeared to stand for Israel.

Peres has never fared well at the ballot box. The joke in Israel is that he could not get elected to his co-op board. But the president is well liked abroad, where his haiku-like pronouncements on coexistence and the modern world are popular among intellectuals in Europe and the United States. With age, as he becomes an increasingly non-threatening figure to potential rivals, his stature has only increased. The president's "unprecedented popularity," he recently told The New York Times, is becoming "almost

embarrassing for me."

For now, the arrangement is useful to all parties, including Netanyahu. As a dove, who won a Nobel Peace Prize for helping to craft the Oslo Accords of 1993, the president takes the edge off Netanyahu's hawkish image. And foreign diplomats often prefer to deal with Peres rather than Lieberman. (The foreign minister, who once suggested that Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak could "go to hell," is not popular in many world capitals.)

The role is well suited to Peres -- an energetic, irrepressible politician who is remarkably fit for someone nearing the end of his ninth decade. Still, much of Peres's expanded job description exists at the pleasure of the prime minister. "It can be stopped at any time that Netanyahu wants it to stop," says one Peres ally, who didn't want to be identified for fear of burning his bridges with the increasingly powerful president.

Peres's expanded role has sparked some debate, however, about whether a strong presidency is really such a good thing in the long term. The Knesset, the country's Parliament, elects the president in Israel. He serves a seven-year term and is subject to few of the democratic checks and balances that the prime minister faces. Some Israelis believe a strong presidency would provide decisive executive leadership for governments that are often hobbled by vituperative coalition bickering.

Yet, while an activist president may lend

some element of political cover to Netanyahu, it also removes a layer of accountability. According to Israeli law, the president can only be dislodged by the vote of three-quarters of the Knesset. "Is it a good thing in terms of our political system?" asks Gadi Taub, a professor of public policy at Hebrew University. "No, it's not. Imagine the queen of England intervening like this."

Still, there is little likelihood that the office will be transformed in any lasting way after Peres fulfills his term (or, perhaps, dies in office; Peres would be 93 when his term expires). There is some talk that Peres has strengthened the office's institutional structure, adding a number of sharp policy advisers.

Peres is not the first president to stretch his official role -- Ezer Weizman, a Labor Party politician who served as president in the late 1990s, was also criticised for meddling in affairs beyond the scope of his office. (He once invited Yasir Arafat to visit his home on Israel's Mediterranean coast.)

But Peres is certainly the first to stretch it this far. "It's very much a function of the individual," says Gerald Steinberg, a political studies professor at Bar Ilan University. Like Britain, Israel lacks a formal constitution, but also like the British monarch, the presidency isn't about to be abolished anytime soon. As Peres has shown, the office can sometimes be useful after all.

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