
SPECIAL ARTICLES

RIGHTS OF THE CONSUMER AND THE ROLE OF CONSUMER SOCIETIES

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Consumer societies have a role to make consumers aware about the ways they were exploited; to educate them about their rights and responsibilities and to help them protect their rights.

The Consumer and his Rights

The consumer is a person who receives foods or services in return for a payment—either in the form of prices or in form of taxes. Four rights of the consumer are well recognised.

The first right is the *right to safety*. When we inform consumers that certain dangerous drugs are still available in our country, we are educating them to fight for their right to safety. For example a preparation containing Loperamide drops killed a few children in Pakistan. A multinational company manufacturing it, announced the withdrawal of this drug in form of drops from throughout the world. This drug has

no place in the rational management of diarrhea. In view of this, the Pakistan Government has rightly banned all anti-diarrheals containing Loperamide, Diphenoxylate and Pipenzolate in liquid forms. These drugs in liquid form are available in India as Jetosec S, Imodium, Pelopem, Lomotil, Piptal, Pipcol and Pipen.

The second right is the *right to information*. The advertisement for a product must provide correct information. For instance, a particular talcum powder advertised for the treatment of prickly heat shows thorns pricking the bare back of a woman. The label on this powder mentions that it should not be used where the skin is raw or broken and it should not be used for infants. But the advertisement does not provide this information.

The third right is the *right to choose*. The consumer should be able to choose products and services at competitive prices with an assurance of satisfactory quality. A shopkeeper refused to pay back rupees two to a housewife when she told him that the same product was available from other shops for rupees eight when he had charged her ten rupees. It was only when she created a row that the shopkeeper obliged her with her right.

The fourth right is the *right to be heard*. The consumers have a right to express consumer interests in the making and execution of Government policy. For instance, all interested in the welfare of infants—including the Government banned advertisements of baby milk powders and ready made cereals on Doordarshan and All India Radio long ago. Recently, we read in the newspapers that the Government has decided to allow these advertisements. Consumer groups made a strong direct

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representation to the ministries concerned and also got this issue raised in press and through members of parliament. Thus by opposing such a decision they could take a positive step in the interest of the child consumer. Similarly, the sustained representation from consumer groups over the last two decades, resulted in the Government's recent enactment of the Consumer Protection Act.

These four consumer rights were brought to focus by the late President John F. Kennedy. Since then, four more rights have been added by consumer organisations – *right to basic needs* like food, clothing, shelter, health care, education and sanitation and *right to redress* or the right to be compensated for misrepresentation, shabby goods or unsatisfactory services. The recent example in this connection is the large compensation paid to an individual with the help of the MRTP Commission. The person was cheated by the owners of a clinic claiming to help people lose excess fat without the help of drugs. The seventh right is the *right to consumer education* or the right to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to be an informed consumer and finally the *right to a healthy environment*.

So the foremost role of consumer societies is to take every opportunity to educate the consumers and to conscientise them for being better equipped to fight for their rights.

Responsibilities of the Consumer

An important role of consumer societies is to stress this point. A consumer must feel responsible for taking care of the environment, particularly in the disposal of waste and in avoiding pollution of all kinds.

The consumer must be educated to conserve natural resources; to remember that there is enough in this world for everyone's needs but not for greed; to avoid hoarding and black marketing; to set standards in healthy living by avoiding smoking and alcohol; by consuming more of fruits, vegetables and sprouts; to encourage breastfeeding and home made foods, rather than ready made cereals; to be ready to have a dialogue with people with whom we differ; to take care that our freedom to choose does not harm or interfere with the rights of others and to insist for a receipt when we buy goods – even if it means paying the normal added taxes.

Protection of the Rights of the Consumer

To pay these roles effectively, the consumer societies can adopt different means. For instance, advantage should be taken of Doordarshan, Radio and print media in mobilising public opinion in favour of the consumer. It is often not realised that the total population covered by the radio is now more than 90%. The Government has instructed Doordarshan and All India Radio to have more programmes of consumer interest in English as well as regional languages. Regarding the print media, one should not forget the district press. It is always eager to get success stories of consumer interest printed in regional languages. The public can also be educated by arranging meetings in schools, colleges and mahila mandals with the help of well informed speakers, posters, audiovisuals and sale or free distribution of informative material. A group in Kerala holds yatras, where its members go in large groups to different cities, and enact street plays and sell publications in regional languages at an affordable price.

A group in Delhi organised a very successful exhibition called Asli Nakli in which they highlighted how the consumers could differentiate between an imitation and the real stuff. Exhibitions on Railway stations have also been tried effectively. Small pamphlets and booklets on healthy living, simple home remedies for common ailments and testing of adulterated food items at home are made available to the public free or at no-profit-no-loss basis.

A few consumer societies undertake testing of consumer products. Others take action on the complaints regarding goods and services provided by private as well as Government bodies. Some consumer societies have a documentation centre which provides useful information on issues of consumer interest to its members, to general public as well as to the journalists. Other societies have successfully taken up issues of public interest to courts and have achieved remarkable success in consumer interest. The legal profession is always ready to provide free service to such causes. Dialogue with industry and with the Advertising Standards Council of India is welcomed by certain societies who are ready to listen to the other point of view without compromising with the interest of the consumer. Some societies have very effectively influenced professional organizations of doctors to work for the interest of the consumers in matters of health and safety. They do this with the help of their members who are also members of these medical associations. Consumer societies also ensure correct weights and measures and required standards in quality of merchandise by working closely with bodies like the Bureau of Indian Standards. The societies can approach the authorities to get representation on such bodies.

The consumer societies become much more effective, if they work along with like-minded organizations at national as well as international level. For instance, the All India Drug Action Network — a network of organizations working on pharmaceuticals has been able to get certain dangerous drugs banned and has also been able to influence the Government for a more rational drug policy. Similarly, the International Organization of Consumers Unions, has been able to inspire large number of consumer societies around the globe, to work more effectively in consumer interest. Similarly the International Baby Food Action Network called IBFAN, the Health Action International called HAI and the Pesticide Action Network called PAN has been able to curb the irresponsible marketing of baby foods, pharmaceuticals and pesticides in the industrialised as well as the developing worlds.

In India, there are about 200 consumer societies. The Government and the industry is now taking note of such societies which were earlier often ignored. However, to be more effective, the consumer societies may have to consider new ways of involving the people in the rural areas and others at the grass-root level. For instance, one society has formed a co-operative with about 10,000 members who pay a nominal fee, and get food items of daily consumption and of good quality, every month, at a much more economical price because of the elimination of the middle man from the scene. Many societies are not yet taking advantage of the Consumer Protection Act in defending the rights of the consumer. Consumer societies must now impress upon the Government to have a separate Ministry for Consumer Affairs. Certain societies are handicapped because of paucity

of funds, or because of office bearers who are too egoistic. Egos of some of these persons have come in the way of forming a confederation of consumer societies at the national level. All said and done, though a

lot more has to be achieved, the consumer societies are playing a useful role in this world, where the business houses are always evolving new and sophisticated methods to exploit the consumer.

NOTES AND NEWS

TUBERCULOSIS IN CHILDREN

Guest Editor: Dr. Vimlesh Seth

Tuberculosis remains a major health problem in the less developed nations. In contrast to adults, tuberculosis in children presents unique problems which may pose diagnostic and therapeutic challenges. Further, the past two decades have witnessed rapid advances in the diagnosis and management of this disease.

Unfortunately, the traditional Western Text Books on Pediatrics do not provide comprehensive information on this subject, particularly in the context of the developing world. Realising the paucity of a consolidated monograph in our country, the 'Indian Pediatrics' has brought out this 'State of the Art' book on 'Tuberculosis in Children'. The volume is spread over 275 pages and has 13 chapters contributed by reputed International and National experts in the field. It covers all the important aspects including Epidemiology, Pharmacotherapy, Neurotuberculosis, BCG, Imaging, Tuberculins, *etc.*

As a special introductory offer, the book can be procured at a price of Rs. 125 (including postage). The entire benefits from the sale of this book will go to the "Indian Pediatrics". Demand drafts only, should be drawn in favour of Indian Pediatrics and mailed to the Editor.