

Recent Trends in Ayurveda

While it is true that Ayurveda as a science or branch of knowledge is Anadi, i.e., it has no beginning, and Nitya or eternal, meaning it always will be, it is equally important that this precious science be assessed, preserved and developed in accordance with changing times and way of life. Further, it is the responsibility of Ayurvedic practitioners that its relevance is not allowed to diminish due to various human and environmental factors. It is my humble privilege to share my insights and experiences with you today on the recent trends in Ayurveda.

Before speaking about Ayurveda specifically, I would like to mention some developments in the field of medicine and healthcare. Doing so would make today's topic only more relevant.

With advancements in technology, the dynamics of the medicine and healthcare sector have changed constantly and significantly. Medical practitioners have been able to acquire new tools and capabilities due to improvements in management of information and knowledge, treatment, and research. Artificial intelligence is increasingly being used to improve the quality of healthcare, chip implants have been successful in treatment of impaired vision, use of miniature chip technology has increased to better treat paralytic patients, and prosthetic limbs are being designed that would be able to function in response to human thought! These are just a few of the numerous other marvelous developments taking place in the field of medicine and healthcare. Now, considering what I just mentioned, I beg to ask, where do we as Ayurvedic practitioners stand, and what is the relevance of Ayurveda with respect to modern times and the age of technology?

And I answer. Ayurveda has been largely reduced to a health fad; it has become more of a marketing gimmick and less of the serious science that it is. Every day we see a company or individual come up with an outrageously overpriced product as simple as tea claiming it to be an Ayurvedic preparation to cure obesity. Even worse, several non-effective, toxic and harmful formulations are being marketed as a solution to obesity, diabetes, various types of aches and pains, and way to build more muscle and strength. These substances almost never have any scientific backing, nor are they approved by medical practitioners. If any study is cited in support of such products, it is at best shady and very questionable. Celebrities and good looking models

are employed to endorse such products, and gullible people buy them like crazy, ruining their health while dreaming of achieving optimal health and fitness.

Another disturbing trend occurring is that a few individuals who clearly are very learned and considered authority on Ayurveda advocate the use of very potent medicines as if they were health supplements to be consumed daily. This is clearly their attempt to market products manufactured or promoted by them, and they have been largely successful because people follow what they say with full faith. But such consumption of medicines without the supervision of a medical practitioner is risky. Every body type is different, and may not respond positively to the substance being ingested. The problems get compounded when an arbitrary dosage is determined for everyone to consume. For example, I have come across recommendations that suggest flaxseed consumption to the tune of 50 grams daily. But I do not recommend it as flaxseed is essentially heat generating, and consuming 50 grams of flax seed daily all year round might cause serious problems. The same holds true for yogic breathing practices and other techniques being propagated as safe for all, and a must for all to practice. I unequivocally condemn this assertion. I know that there are breathing techniques that instead of benefitting, increase blood pressure and heart rate, even if done with low or moderate intensity. Therefore, even a breathing practice should be taken up and continued only in consultation with a qualified Ayurvedic doctor who knows the patient's condition and body composition, and can anticipate what affect such practice would have on the patient.

I am also concerned with the increasing number of unqualified self-proclaimed Ayurvedic experts who have proliferated on the internet considerably over the years. They become famous and gather a following by doling out medical advice that is simply atrocious and harmful. I ask myself, how did Ayurveda get relegated to quackery to such a large extent? Everybody seems to be an Ayurveda specialist these days.

I for one, firmly believe that we as Ayurveda practitioners are responsible for the relegation of Ayurveda. Today, due to the increasing psychological and physical problems that mankind is facing, Ayurveda should have been more relevant than ever, and accepted as such. But unfortunately, it seems to have come to be seen as a pseudo-practice the only aim of which is to make money. I believe that it is our responsibility to preserve the sanctity of the science and advance it so that it addresses the problems faced by man in this day and age.

While I have pointed out several issues related to our field of practice that should be addressed, and immediately so, I would like to share with you a few positive developments that have occurred in the Ayurvedic system of treatment. Thereafter, I would give my suggestions to advance and modernize Ayurveda.

1. An increasing number of students is opting to study Ayurveda. In the past few years, Ayurveda has replaced dentistry to take the number 2 spot as the preferred field of medical study.
2. Over the last few years, even allopathic practitioners have recognized the holistic healing approach of Ayurveda, and suggested their patients to seek Ayurvedic treatment for several ailments. The number of patients coming to me for treatment after giving up allopathic treatment has only increased over the years. On a related note, my personal observation is that the number of patients suffering from auto-immune disorders, polyarthralgia, ankylosing spondylitis, renal failure, allergic bronchitis (children and adults), liver disorders such as fatty liver, liver cirrhosis, BPH (benign prostate hypertrophy), and uterine fibroids have increased.
3. Automation has made its way into Ayurveda. Practices like Shirodhara are now accomplished with the help of machines.
4. Swaras chikitsa, meaning treatment using fresh juice of herbs, has been on the rise due to development of technology that has made extraction and preservation of herbal extracts possible. Earlier, due to lack of technology and a way to extract herb essence, such treatment was limited.
5. The phenomenon of tele-medicine has made its presence felt in the field of Ayurveda. This practice makes treatment possible without the physical presence of the doctor near the patient. Further, this system helps patients track their diet, medication and progress by informing them beforehand about what to eat, when to eat, taking their medication, etc. Patients' test results, vital stats, and all other important information is readily available for reference.

6. Advancements in technology have made possible the consumption of Ayurvedic medicine in the form of tablets and capsules. Thus, administration of ghana satva has become relatively easier while maintaining palatability.

I now lay down my recommendations to make Ayurveda more relevant and credible:

1. Existing literature on Ayurveda must be made more precise. The system of education in Ayurveda is dependent on texts written by sages such as Charaka, Sushruta and Patanjali. However, the text is largely open to interpretation. It is this openness to interpretation that must be minimized so that a sutra conveys as precise a meaning as possible. To this end, a panel of experienced Ayurvedacharyas must be formed that would review existing books on Ayurveda and compile only such explanations that convey the true essence of a given sutra, thereby reducing vagueness to the minimum. Also, in case of multiple explanations, relevant contexts and variations therein must be specified so that the student may be well equipped to diagnose an illness and prescribe the most effective medicine possible considering the environment of the patient.
2. I feel an urgent need for the establishment of precise specifications related to frequency and dosage of prescribed Ayurvedic medicine. Currently, different practitioners recommend different dosages of the same medicine to patients with similar problems. The prescribed frequency of the medicine also varies. We must have an authoritative text that clearly lays down with no ambiguity how much medicine should be taken through the day for a given condition. Granted, this would warrant research and documentation of findings, but it must be done. Research is an integral part of any field of scientific study. Ayurveda is no different. Personally, I have successfully used the method of BHAVNA to increase potency and decrease dosage of medicine administered. Such practices should be documented and standardized, and further research must continue. Help of independent research agencies may be sought to expedite the research process.
3. I believe that today is the time most conducive to Ayurvedic research and development. We are in the best phase today for Ayurveda to evolve, but this would require the community of Ayurvedic practitioners to take initiative. There are avenues to be explored in every field of medicine, and serious research must be carried out to prepare more effective Ayurvedic medicines, simplify literature, and make Ayurveda more relevant in

the eyes of the masses as well as practitioners of western systems of treatment. I don't see any reason why Ayurveda should not be considered a superior substitute to allopathic treatment.

4. There is a need for a radical change in the way Ayurvedic education is imparted. I have already mentioned that existing texts should be researched, reviewed, revised and standardized. Further, it must be ensured that all institutions imparting Ayurvedic knowledge follow a uniform curriculum, meaning, the course must comprise the same books all over the country, and the duration of course also must be uniform throughout. However, this alone would not be enough. The competency of Ayurvedic teachers must be increased greatly. Teachers must be able to give all possible explanations related to a sutra, and also instruct how to prepare medicines. They must be full of conviction and skill, and pass the same to students so that future generations of Ayurvedic doctors develop to be as sharp and confident as their western counterparts. This is not something that can be achieved overnight. It will require consistent efforts from the entire Ayurvedic community for a protracted period of time before the desired developments become part of the modern Ayurvedic education system. Restructuring and bringing precision to the Ayurvedic system will also attract foreign students which will help spread this glorious ancient science of India across the globe.

To conclude, I would reiterate that Ayurveda is Anadi and Nitya, but it is our responsibility that mankind is not left bereft of this nectar due to ignorance, negligence, irresponsibility and malpractices. I recite the shloka that conveys the essence of Ayurveda. May this be the guiding light for all of us:

"आयुर्वेदस्य प्रयोजनं स्वस्थस्य स्वास्थ्य रक्षणं आतुरस्य विकार प्रशमनं च"