

[Animal Testing In Ayurveda](#)

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Ethics Collide With Old and New Science

It was rather unsettling. A HINDUISM TODAY computer was linked by modem to the Medline medical data bank. On screen was a listing of medical magazine stories on ayurveda, the Hindu healing system. The citations were global: Japan, Germany, US, Australia, Russia, Canada, Israel, Italy and naturally India. In all there were 366 references. Scrolling down the list, interesting abstracts like The Ayurvedic tradition of child care, Pediatric wisdom of ancient India and Experiences with ayurvedic psychotherapy flickered by.

But in the India section, a pattern appeared of ayurvedic substances or products being tested in labs on animals. Typical entries by Indian doctors were: Effect of hepatoprotective ayurvedic drugs on lipases following CC14 induced hepatic injury in rats and The Ayurvedic medicines haritaki, amala and bahir reduce cholesterol-induced atherosclerosis in rabbits. In layman's terms, rabbits' arteries were clogged and rats' livers ravaged. Routinely, all lab animals are killed after experiments end. Is ayurveda, the "deep science of life," building a bio-medical and commercial reputation on cruel animal exploitation? Perhaps the most alarming instance is the testing of Maharishi Ayur-Veda Products International's Maharishi Amrit Kalash. Maharishi Ayurveda International Products is a profit company of Transcendental Meditation. In an article on the Maharishi system of ayurveda published in the May 1991 Journal of the American Medical Association TM authors used several paragraphs to tell how three formulas of Maharishi Amrit Kalash were tested in American universities on animals purposely given breast and lung cancer. Another animal test was run in conjunction with doctors from the University of Madras in India. TM advertises its ayurveda product line in many health, self-help and spiritual consciousness magazines In the West. The ads don't mention the animal experiments. As such, TM's ayurvedic line would make the PETA (People for

the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the most influential animal rights organization in the US) hit list of products to boycott because of animal cruelty. A recent poll in the US tallied 80% of the American public want animal experimentation terminated.

Dr. Hari Sharma, a long-time Transcendental Meditation initiate and head of anatomic pathology at Ohio State University, is a chief researcher for the Maharishi Ayurveda line. He explained to HINDUISM TODAY that "it is necessary to sacrifice a few for the benefit of the greater public" when asked about the ethics of animal experimentation.

With meditation institutions such as TM engaged in vivisection, and a computer screen full of ayurveda/animal experiments out of India, HINDUISM TODAY launched an examination of ayurveda experimentation in India. The investigation lit up a lot of ethical revolving doors: some ancient ayurvedic texts prescribe flesh products - including blood - as curative measures; animal testing was conducted in ayurveda's history; some ayurveda firms are copycatting allopathic medicine experimentation to gain credibility in the Indian marketplace; all the ayurveda government officers or company researchers we talked to chose to treat ayurveda as functioning outside of the principle of ahimsa, noninjury, thus they could personally and professionally justify small scale animal testing.

NIGHTMARE LABS

Animal experiment labs in India aren't somehow compassionately different than other labs worldwide. Researchers in white smocks, glinting metal instruments and glass tubes, clinical cleanliness masking stains here and there, cages, refrigerators, centrifuge machines, restraining tables and collars, the mixed - and alarming even to human patients - smells of antiseptic and anesthetics. The lab's atmosphere is psychically laced with a lingering animal terror that can't be washed out or masked. Even stronger than the fear, as Dr. Richard Ryder - a researcher in British and American labs - recalls is "the guilt pervading there."

In India's protean economy, thousands of small ayurvedic and allopathic drug houses have cropped up. Some purchase animals from larger and reputed drug firms and conduct experiments solely to satisfy the local drug enforcement authorities. Their facilities are crude, nightmarish.

The big three drug and ayurveda manufacturers in India are Alarcin, Charak and Himalayan. All three undertake animal tests as a marketing strategy. These companies purposely woo consumers with Western science-based animal lab data. "It is an unnecessary show to convince people and gain a good market. People believe in ayurvedic products more if it is said they are tested on the Western medicine lines," observes Mrs. Sailaja, ayurveda doctor and chief of quality control and research and development at Bajaj Seva Ashrama, an ayurvedic medicine and cosmetic firm.

Bajaj doesn't do animal experiments, but they value the aura of credibility from Western doctors and technology. C.B. Vijaya Vargi, general manager of Bajaj, says, "All our ayurvedic products registered a marked growth over decades of marketing partially due to the support of allopathic doctors. This was achieved from Western research techniques we have applied." He estimated to HINDUISM TODAY it would be fifty years before India raised a "hue and cry against animal experiments."

It could be sooner if organizations like the India chapter of Beauty Without Cruelty became a guiding force. Beauty Without Cruelty (BWC) - founded in the US - is the leading animal protection group in India. Even with offices in Pune (headquarters), New Delhi, Madras and Bangalore, BWC is still a mouse always about to be trampled by the elephantine size of India. BWC's founding chapters in America are successfully pressuring US cosmetic firms to stop piling up animal carcasses as ingredients and test subjects. Cosmetics are tested for toxicity to skin, eye and internal ingestion on rabbits in a series of lengthy, painful, finally deadly trials. The India BWC branches have barely focused on cruel cosmetics. Their attention is consumed in large-scale animal poaching and product exportation. Are ayurveda cosmetics undergoing animal toxicity tests? Bhagawan Dash, deputy advisor in ayurveda to the government, thinks not. "There is nothing in ayurvedic cosmetics to test against as most of them are external applications for beautification value." But the question remains if new ayurvedic beauty formulas might be tested against animals to check for reactions before selling the product. Mrs. Sailaja said she supported animal testing of undocumented ayurveda plants.

The closest India has come to a national animal rights awareness is the cow-slaughter ban movement. This agitation is shepherded by a number of leading Hindu swamis from venerable institutions, and is always a hot-button issue tied to the resurgence of Hindu values in India. But the campaign is stalled.

In 1960, the "Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act" was passed. It sanctions vivisection on lower animal species, on higher species only if necessary, cautions against vivisection for teaching manual skills and recommends alternative learning media over animal usage in educational programs.

RIGHTS OF RITA

Most of the experts we talked to worked in New Delhi. Six thousand years ago, in the genesis time of the Veda scriptures (and later Agamas), New Delhi was a deciduous forest region, materialistic science did not exist, kingdoms and consumer economies were small. As the Veda knowledge coalesced, three great imperatives rose and towered over Hindu society: satya (pursuit of spiritual realization), tapas (disciplined practices and lifestyle toward soul evolution) and rita (God-centric natural and ethical order in consciousness, nature, society, world and cosmos). Rita touched everywhere, everything, a kind of ethical ether, and suffusing this ether was ahimsa, the code of noninjury. It was a blanket principle the rishis spread over society: compassion, kindness, empathy and harmlessness to life forms.

Exceptions existed: protection of home, society and kingdom from invaders, criminals and wild beasts; unavoidable agricultural injury; and some Vedic fire rituals that sacrificed and dismembered animals. The last is an ethical dilemma many of the ayurveda experts brought up as a justification that "ahimsa and ayurveda are distinct even in the pre-historic days," notes Dr. Pandey, Director of Indian Council of Historical Research. "A few chosen animals were killed and their flesh and blood used for ayurvedic preparations even in those brahminical days. Ahimsa ethics were never opposite to ayurveda science." He says there is no direct evidence of animal testing in ancient ayurveda. But according to the ayurveda shastras and ayurvedic authorities and doctors, testing occurred.

Dr. Virender Sodhi is one of the few practicing ayurvedic physicians in the US. He is head of the Ayurvedic and Naturopathic Institute in Bellevue, Washington state. He told HINDUISM TODAY, "I have studied extensively the ayurveda shastras." We asked him about ancient animal trials for ayurveda substances. "Yes, ayurveda compounds were given to elephants, horses, monkeys, parrots, pigeons to test effects, but a disease or injury was not induced. The animals already suffered from a disease. This was the only time experimentation was allowed."

"In ayurveda medical school, I couldn't understand how ayurveda could evolve without scientific observation and experiment. But now I comprehend how the rishis communicated with the plants and herbs in meditation."

Does Dr. Sodhi prescribe ayurveda's flesh remedies: meat - cow, (elephant and horse were also used) fish, fowl, fresh blood, animal fat, bone marrow? Some of them, yes. He also said many ayurveda doctors do not prescribe these as a matter of ahimsa/vegetarian principle. "In ayurveda, meat was not considered a food-purpose diet. It was against human spiritual and physical nature. But it was essential for certain treatments. The animal was sacrificed for the patient, and it involved a ritual of gratitude for the animal." He explained how in extreme anemic conditions, he puts his patients on a meat diet for three months, "to build up hemoglobins in the blood, which fully reforms every 120 days." Does he explain to his patients about the sacrificial ceremony for the meat?. No, but he does give them a lecture on buying organic, free-range meat. We asked if he looked into alternatives to meat. "Yes, we explored herbs and vegetables with high iron content, but they were taking six months to make the change." He says most people who come to him choose not to follow the meat diet.

Making things murkier is Bajaj Seva Ashrama's Mrs. Sailaja who states that ayurveda meat cures were only prescribed to low-caste workers who already ate meat.

On present day animal experimentation. Dr. Sodhi inquired. "Why do we need to do this, when the ayurveda methods are proven by thousands of years of success?"

Ayurveda has gone through hundreds of permutations through the centuries, including importation of knowledge from Persia, Greece and China. We do not possess original writings of the founding patriarchs of ayurveda. The shastras are later compilations. The refining process of ayurveda continues today - a lot of practices in the ancient texts are censored - some Bhagawan Dash categorized as "inhuman to even speak about in modern light."

The following interviews show there is a blurring of ahimsa based on ayurveda's past that would allow for testing. There is also an alarming approach by some

spiritual institutions. At a public discourse, a Ramakrishna Order swami advocated testing on lower animals by Western science methods in order to prove the validity of Vedic knowledge. In contrast, Swami Ananda, 105-years-old, of Hyderabad, told HINDUISM TODAY "Absolute ahimsa is the only prescription for all beings to live in absolute harmony. Where is the need of research on animals?"

As the ayurveda shastras evolved long after the Vedas, we don't know if the rishis would have sanctioned animal experimentation in ayurveda. Ahimsa distills down to a personal sense of conscience, the first awakening of the mind of the soul. The final question is: would ayurvedic practitioners or overseers personally immobilize an animal, induce a disease or dysfunction and run intrusive tests?

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