

Editorial

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Yellapragada SubbaRow is the featured scientist of the month. He is yet another good example of mismatch between a person's academic grades in school and college and his extraordinary achievements in his chosen field of science – in SubbaRow's case, biochemistry, chemistry and medicine. SubbaRow, with a very modest family background, made three attempts to pass his matriculation examination, got only a diploma certificate (LMS) instead of a degree in medicine (MBBS) and failed to get into the State Medical Service. But what SubbaRow achieved later during just 25 years of his research career, no doctor with several degrees has so far been able to match. While graduating from Harvard Medical School, he discovered the biochemistry of muscle contraction and relaxation and related carbohydrate metabolism by discovering phosphocreatine and ATP hydrolysis. Later he headed a leading US pharmaceutical unit, Lederle Laboratories, led scores of researchers there and played a major role in discovering and introducing chemicals to cure several diseases, thereby alleviating human suffering. Among these chemical entities the important ones are folic acid or vitamin B₉ (cures pernicious anaemia, tropical sprue), methotrexate (first effective drug used even today in cancer chemotherapy), diethylcarbamazine (to treat filariasis), aureomycin (the first broad-spectrum tetracycline antibiotic).

As has happened in many other well-deserved cases, SubbaRow did not get the recognition by way of awards or prizes, least of all the Nobel Prize. In an editorial in *Angewandte Chemie International Edition*, Roald Hoffmann, himself a Nobel Laureate muses, "What real purpose does the Nobel Prize serve?...Does it affect our professional opinion of what is good chemistry?...Does it make people (other than the mothers of the recipients) happy?" (*Angew. Chem. Intl. Ed.*, Vol.51, pp.1734–1735, 2012). He



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himself provides the answer, “By recognising excellence, the Nobel Prize evokes aspiration. Especially for young people”. In the same breath he further says, “... oh-so many do good things, yet only few can be rewarded”. SubbaRow was one of those “oh-so many”. SubbaRow was a great researcher who was never seen on the radar of award-giving organisations. Perhaps to some extent his untimely death is to be blamed for this, because the work on folic acid, cancer drugs, filariasis and tetracycline antibiotics was carried out just a few years before his tragic end. The later workers in these areas have distinctly recognised the worth of SubbaRow’s contributions to the medical world. It is not for nothing that the *New York Herald-Tribune* had pronounced him “one of the most eminent medical minds of the century”, on his death.

In 1950 Doron Antrim wrote in *Argosy* magazine, “You’ve probably never heard of Dr. Yellapragada SubbaRow. Yet, because he lived, you may be alive and are well today. Because he lived you may live longer.”

We Indians very much lament that only a few Indians have won the Nobel Prize. We hanker for and value the awards, particularly those given by foreign organizations, but do very little to recognise greatness or provide the necessary environment to achieve it. SubbaRow came to light in India only when plague broke out in Surat in 1994 and was contained by a tetracycline drug. It so happened that the next year was his birth centenary. True, it would have been great for India and perhaps for SubbaRow too, had he won a Nobel Prize. But denial of any big award has certainly not diminished his greatness and his unforgettable service in alleviating human suffering. I am sure he will be remembered much more than many Nobel Prize winners and will surely be an inspiration for the younger generation for a long time.

