Special issue in honor of Dr. Norman R. Farnsworth

For someone like me from the Asian continent, where traditional medicines still do brisk business, medicinal properties of plants are not an alien concept. Neem, tulsi, and ginger are still very much a part of the first-aid kits of Indian grandmothers who, for generations, have been successfully grinding up mixtures for ailments like common cold or sore throat.

Coming from an upper middle-class family involved in pharmacy business at Deori (M.P.), India since the last 50 years, I had a natural interest in the concepts of pharmacognosist (the study of medicines derived from natural sources). In my pursuit for a greater understanding of the stream, Dr. Norman R. Farnsworth [Figure 1] was the lighthouse of my knowledge. I looked up to him whenever I found myself lost in the high tides of academics. And sadly today, the octogenarian grand old man of medicinal plant research is no more.

However, he has left behind a body of work which, for the aspiring and the seekers, will act as a fertile soil to cultivate path-breaking approaches in the stream for many years to come. Born on March 23, 1930 in Massachusetts, Norman Farnsworth was a Korean War veteran, drafted in the US Army at an age 18 in 1949. He served in the Third Infantry Division, Seventh Regimental Combat Team. Although he was seriously wounded in the winter of 1950, Farnsworth survived. Corporal Farnsworth was awarded the Korean Ribbon with four Battle Stars, the Combat Medical Badge, and Bronze Star with a "V" device.

Soon after, he trained his guns on pharmacy and received his degree from the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy in 1953 and his PhD in Pharmacognosy, the study of drugs of natural origin (including medicinal plants, microbes, marine organisms, and fungi), from the University of Pittsburgh in 1959. At Pitt, he helped to institute a Pharmacognosy PhD program at the university and was the first to chair it.

His early career, starting in 1970, was with the College of Pharmacy at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) where he served as Head of the Department of Pharmacognosy and Pharmacology from 1970 to 1982. At UIC, he was also Research Professor of Pharmacognosy, the Director of the Pharmacognosy Graduate Program, and Director of the World Health Organization Program for Collaborative Research in the Pharmaceutical Sciences – a multidisciplinary program which brought together, for the first time, scientists from numerous fields of medicinal plant research to collaborate on drug discovery from medicinal plants. In 1988, he was named Senior University Scholar at UIC. He held the title of Distinguished Professor of Pharmacognosy, which he received for his "scholarship, creativity, and leadership," from 2001 until his death.

Pharmacognosy, despite its roots into age-old traditional practices of healing, is a fairly new concept. It now has to rise up to the challenge of the new world where despite advancement in medical science, the medical threats to human life are more complex and sinister. The foremost challenge will be to make the subject socially relevant and pharmaceutically adaptable. The loss of biodiversity to the changing global climate and the chasm between traditional use of medicine and modern science is growing wider. This calls for building bridges lest the knowledge is lost.

Figure 1: Dr. Norman R. Farnsworth

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The stress needs to be on conservation by careful collection of plants or organized cultivation. Pharmacognosy needs to be in the center of the universe with clearly defined linkages to information, plant identification, sourcing, pharmaceutical chemistry, and clinical studies. Historically, plants have been classified very broadly as either therapeutic or toxic. The need for toxicological evaluation also needs significant attention.

The branch would also need more passionate practitioners who could follow on the footsteps of giants like Dr. Norman, who have paved the path for future research. The branch will also need to focus on the conservation of intellectual property rights and environmental consequences. In all, a multidisciplinary and cooperative effort from various branches of pharmaceutical chemistry and medicine will help fructify the plant drugs. Fransworth was himself an advocate of this in his life. He was outspoken and at times critical of scientists and institutions of falling short in their task. He pushed his students to strive to the highest degree of academic and professional excellence. And under this brash facade was a man who would be generous with his time and his personal funds.

Another phrase used to describe Dr. Farnsworth is the "quintessential renaissance man," as he was so called in an editorial in the ASP's Journal of Natural Products by Farnsworth's colleagues Prof. Fong, Geoffrey A. Cordell, and A. Douglas Kinghorn, JNP's editor-in-chief. "To fully depict Farnsworth, one needs to write a book," Dr. Fong had said. If ever a book had been written on Dr. Farnsworth, it would not have been complete without mentioning his love for Marsh Wheeling cigars. In fact, Dr. Fong had said that he has had the "pleasure" of regularly mailing boxes of cigars labeled as "Investigational Material: Of no commercial interest" to Munich in 1966, where Dr. Farnsworth was a visiting professor.

Late in his life, Dr. Farnsworth quit, but relished the kick out of chewing on the cigar without lighting it up!

As Isaac Newton once said, "If I have been able to see further, it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants." To the giant of the Pharmacognosy, this special issue is a humble tribute from young natural product scientists.

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