

# SECOND OPINION

## Health warning

### When remedies are worse than what they're meant to prevent

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All untimely deaths are senseless, but some are more senseless than others. One such was that of my nephew, Paresh, who died last month. At a robust 69, Paresh was not just full of life; in many ways life was full of him. He loved to travel, to meet and interact with very many different people in different parts of the world. And he brought his unique gift of buoyant optimism and good cheer to all the many lives he connected with.

What killed him was a preventive vaccine for yellow fever. Thanks to medical science, this particular disease has been eradicated from almost all parts of the world, and there was literally no earthly reason for Paresh, or indeed anyone else, to take an anti-yellow fever shot. But inveterate and inexhaustible traveller that he was, he took the inoculation on the off-chance that sometime, when he was going someplace, he might need it. So why not be prepared?

It proved to be a fatal assumption. The preventive remedy turned out to be worse than the disease it was supposed to guard against: the vaccine which was meant to help his immunological system develop the antibodies to fight the ailment reacted adversely on him – as it does in approximately one out of 250,000 cases – and infected him with the very illness from which it was meant to protect him. The symptoms of yellow fever were not recognised till far too late, and leaving behind a grieving family and a legion of friends Paresh needlessly died of a disease that doesn't exist in India or in almost any other part of the world.

His case is symptomatic of that most deadly and vicious of pathologies: the supposed cure that ends up being worse than what it is meant to cure. Modern science has worked miracles in fighting back the onslaught of disease and affliction and has greatly extended human longevity. But in creating its myriad marvels it has also, inadvertently, given birth to monsters, all the more dangerous because they come in the guise of saviours.

Killer vaccines that bring about the fatal sickness they are meant to prevent are only one of the baneful by-blows of science. Like Dr Frankenstein who gave life to the monster that destroyed him, in its zeal to extend the frontiers of its own capabilities science has unwittingly given rise to fearful creations. So-called 'wonder drugs' like thalidomide – the maternity medication which caused deformed births – show that despite all the progress it undoubtedly has made, medicine remains an inexact science which should carry its own health warning.

Ongoing scientific research in diverse fields continues to create hundreds of new virus-like life forms which could lead to totally unpredictable and unforeseen consequences in the effects they have on the environment and on human and animal biology. The widespread and unrestrained use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides in order to increase agricultural yields and exorcise forever the age-old spectre of hunger and famine has poisoned the earth, and the food that we eat. Despite such bitter harvests, genetically modified crops, including food crops, are increasingly promoted, overriding the warnings and protests of their many critics.

With the decoding of the human genome, genetic engineering has taken a giant leap forward, and opened up uncharted territory for experimentation, which could include the creation of life itself in a laboratory test tube. Many questions arise, not the least perhaps being the one that asks: With all these new forms of life, what new forms of death are we also creating?

In a Greek myth, the hero seeks to escape the monster in a maze. Science is the maze we have created to escape our mortality, which waits for us to find our own way back to it. And we find newer, more inventive ways to do just that.

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