

## A lay person's guide to medicine: Book review

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Lay persons in developing nations in general and South Asia in particular face problems in obtaining objective, reliable and unbiased information about medicines. LOCOST (low cost standard therapeutics) is an Indian company which makes essential medicines at the lowest possible prices. LOCOST makes more than 60 essential medicines in 80 formulations (liquids, capsules, tablets). LOCOST's education cell focuses on education and training relating to rational use of medicines. LOCOST ([www.locostindia.com](http://www.locostindia.com)) brings out a Gujarati monthly, Apnu Swasthya, for the general public. It also brings out other publications for the general public, the latest being the Gujarati version of the famous classic, *Where there is No Doctor*; and *A Lay Person's Guide to Medicine*, a guide on the use and political economy of medicines. The book can be downloaded free of cost from the company website and from the document sharing site Scribd ([http://www.scribd.com/document\\_collections/2474529](http://www.scribd.com/document_collections/2474529)).

The first chapter is about Drugs in general. The chapter describes drug forms and administration, prescription writing and guidelines for the same, method of action of a drug, factors affecting drug use and common problems of drug use by consumers. The guidelines for safe and effective use of drugs (do's and don't's) are very well written. The annexure or appendix to the chapter describes common drug categories and how they work. I personally feel that at places the writing is too technical and lay persons may find it

difficult to understand. The second chapter is on Essential drugs. The box on 'Anatomy of a health disaster' makes for grim reading. The problem of irrational preparations and their huge cost burden in India is starkly brought out. The issue of generics, branded generics and brands has been well covered. Frequently asked questions (FAQs) about generics and brands will be useful for consumers. The reasons for non-use of essential medicines have been well explored. The criteria followed by Bangladesh to promote rational use of medicines in the country is worthy of emulation elsewhere.

The next chapter deals with the vital issue of 'Rationality of drugs'. Various causes for irrationality, reasons why particular preparations are irrational and the issue of doctors of a particular system of medicine prescribing drugs belonging to another system has been well described. The cartoons and the sketches accompanying the text are interesting but in many places again the language is highly technical. The fourth chapter discusses the vast pharma market of India and the success of Indian companies. 'Drug promotion, clinical trials and conflict of interest' is the focus of chapter 5. The chapter opens with various forms of entanglement practiced by drug companies. Key opinion leaders (doctors who can promote medicines to their colleagues) and cozy connections between pharmaceutical companies and professional medical associations has been highlighted. Clinical trials in India and conflict of interest are also covered.

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Patents have become an important issue in developing nations with a number of battles being fought over this issue. The chapter describes how multinational corporations are using intellectual property rights and patent protection to charge higher and higher prices for medicines. Pricing and availability of drugs forms the focus of chapter 7. The issue of ambiguous pricing of different brands of a particular medicine was of special interest to me as I had previously studied this phenomenon among brands in Nepal. The number of days which a laborer has to work to buy a particular medicine will be of interest and doctors can understand the impact of medicine costs on the poor. The issue of inflation of costs of research and development by pharma companies is also discussed in the chapter. Women and medicine and laws pertaining to drug use in India are other topics discussed. The issue of men and women responding differently to drugs, clinical trials in women, issue of misuse of various drugs in women are discussed. The web links pertaining to Pharmaceuticals is very useful. Chapter 9 deals with

what is to be done while section 2 contains profiles of 50 drugs and section 3 describes 107 drugs.

A limitation is that the book is predominantly India centric and concentrates on the Indian consumer. The writing is technical and difficult to read in places. I really enjoyed the pictures and the text boxes in the book. The producers of the book believe in the spirit of Copyleft (Maybe a play on the word 'copyright'?). They state anybody can copy this work for public purposes provided the works derived there from could also be reproduced free of cost for public interest and for non-commercial purposes only. The organization LOCOST must be congratulated on producing this useful book which will be helpful for laypersons to understand medicines.

**About the book:** Low Cost Standard Therapeutics (LOCOST), Baroda, Gujarat, India. A lay person's guide to medicines 2006. Suggested contribution INR 300, US \$ 15. E-mail: [Locost@satyam.net.in](mailto:Locost@satyam.net.in)