



QUANTUM LEAP

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A 'sweet' move from Unicef to Nestlé

THE United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) has just released a glossy report on the state of the world's children. Senior officials of the UN body made the right noises about children, the need to improve their nutritional status and so on, at media dos in several important capitals across the globe.

At a similar occasion a couple of years ago, Ann Veneman — who was Executive Director of the agency till April 2010 — had articulated Unicef's position on how exclusive breastfeeding for toddlers is critical to combat hunger and promote child survival. Post-retirement the UN official has undergone a change of mind.

She will now be on the board of a company which has been accused of subverting efforts to promote breastfeeding by flouting laws in order to market its formula foods. Yes, Veneman is joining the Board of Directors of Switzerland-based food giant — Nestlé.

Veneman's transition from advocating nutrition and health to the board room of a multinational food company has been rather smooth, but has shocked health advocates all over.

POOR hand hygiene among doctors and hospital staff is known to be a major cause of hospital-borne infections.

An Israeli company, Hygenix, has come up with a novel solution to the problem of inadequate hand hygiene among hospital personnel — a high-tech bracelet to keep their hands clean.

The bracelet is equipped with gyroscopes and other movement sensors and emits a gentle red LED light to remind the hospital workers to wash their hands between patients or at a programmed frequently. The bracelet can communicate the information via wireless with a central system.

The system incorporates sensors on the bracelet, in the dispensers and in the tap to measure the duration of vigorous hand washing by the employees, and then transfers that information to a computer. So you can't fool the system by just opening the tap and not washing hands.

VOLTE FACE: Ann Veneman (right) of Unicef and Derek Yach (below) of WHO both of whom have been picked up by food giants



It is nothing short of a coup for the food industry which is increasingly under attack for promoting unhealthy snacking and eating habits among children. Veneman has had an 'illustrious' past.

In 2005, when she was appointed to the top post in Unicef, not everyone was comfortable because of her past connections with agribusiness as secretary of agriculture in the Bush Administration.

"Veneman's promotion by the Bush Administration — Unicef is traditionally headed by an American — was greeted with concerns by some grassroots activists because of her good relations with big business and her limited experience in child welfare issues", medical journal *The Lancet* had noted in 2006.

While at the UN body, Veneman consciously emphasised the use of ready-to-use foods as a strategy to counter malnutrition.

As per her own admission made a few months before her term ended, "Unicef has significantly contributed to accelerating the use of ready-to-use therapeutic foods for treatment of acute malnutrition, with Unicef purchases of the product increasing from 100 metric tons in 2003 to over 11,000 metric tons in 2008".

Veneman's appointment is part of the trend which has seen junk food makers trying to position themselves as marketers of healthy and nutritious foods.

A few years back PepsiCo

appointed Derek Yach, former Executive Director of non-communicable diseases at the World Health Organisation (WHO), as its head of health and nutrition policies.

Yach frequently writes or co-authors review articles and comments in medical journals, pushing the industry point of view. Such articles are then cited to influence policy makers.

PepsiCo got the head of cardiovascular diseases at Centre for Disease Control (CDC) — a US government arm — to head its own division on heart health. By appointing people connected with top health bodies, these companies want to portray themselves as part of the solution and not problem, and also want to influence policy making in health and nutrition.

At this rate, the day is not far off when junk food makers will position themselves as 'health and nutrition research' outfits and start dictating national health policies.

THE PERILS OF FREE JOURNALS

IT APPEARS that editorial independence of a medical journal depends on its revenue source. If a journal is distributed free (while depending on advertisements from pharma companies as major source of revenue) it positively recommends specific drugs, while journals funded solely by subscriptions usually recommend against the use of drugs. This has come to light in a study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. This is significant because doctors heavily rely on medical journals for updating medical information. Many of these journals — which rely on advertising for revenue and contain easy-to-read summaries of published research — are sent free to physicians.

The study — conducted in Germany — compared free journals with those funded by subscriptions. It showed that 'the tendency to positively recommend the use of a drug depends on the source of a journal's funding'. Free journals almost exclusively endorsed the use of the selected drugs, whereas journals that rely exclusively on subscription fees are more likely to recommend against the use of the same drugs.

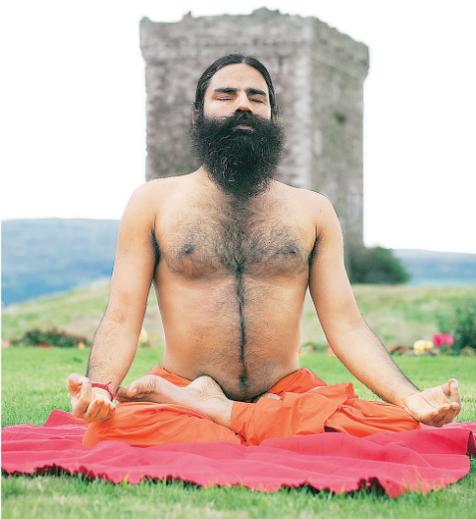
More than half of the doctors surveyed had used free journals as a source of information during the previous month. Covert promotion of pharmaceuticals is an important public health issue because it can contribute to unnecessary overuse of certain drugs or lead to their off-label use without sufficient evidence of efficacy, the *Canadian journal* said in an accompanying editorial.



Bryan Pijanowski (centre) at a remote-listening post

USUALLY ecological changes are measured by looking at water, air, soil, vegetation and other such indicators. Now scientists feel that even sound can be used for this purpose. It could be used to detect early changes in climate, weather patterns, presence of pollution or other alterations to a landscape. This new field of research has been named soundscape ecology by researchers from Purdue University led by Bryan Pijanowski who have conducted some initial experiments in this field and have published their findings in *Journal BioScience*. It involves capturing sounds such as birds chirping, wind rustling through leaves and even the absence of noise, and analysing them. The dawn and dusk choruses of birds are very characteristic of a location. If the intensity or patterns of these choruses change, there is likely something causing that change.

Quack law could land Baba in jail



Baba Ramdev claims to have cured diabetes, hypertension and even cancer

THE debate on black money fueled by tele-guru Ramdev has not only raised the hackles of the ruling party at the centre but also the medical profession.

While defending on different television channels, the ashrams and pharmacies run by him, Ramdev has made tall claims that he has been able to cure people of diseases like diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, ailments of the stomach and even cancer.

Such claims — points out Dr Anil Bansal, head of the anti-quackery cell at the Indian Medical Association — amount to violation of the Drugs and

Magical Remedies Act (objectionable advertisements) Act of 1954.

The law says that "no person carrying on or purporting to carry on the profession of administering magic remedies shall take any part in the publication of any advertisement referring to any magic remedy which directly or indirectly claims to be efficacious for any of the purposes". Ramdev claims to have cured most of the diseases which are mentioned in the schedule of the law.

If found guilty of promoting magical remedies, the yoga guru could land in jail for a minimum of six months.