

Olle Hansson and 'Inside Ciba Geigy'

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Olle Hansson Day May 23

Olle Hansson was an icon of the activist medical profession and wrote a classic in medical investigative exposure. The book was called 'INSIDE CIBA GEIGY' and published in Penang, Malaysia in 1989. It is an amazing piece and we like to share the foreword written by Anwar Fazal, former President of International Organisation of Consumers Union (IOCU), co-founder of Health Action International (HAI) and the instigator for the idea of a People Health Assembly. 'Olle was a very special inspiration to us. His courage, his competence, his commitment were rare in a profession that is more often too comfortable or too implicated to speak out against a powerful industry.' His passing on 23 May 1985 was mourned not by words but by a series of actions that will continue to inspire those working to see a more responsible pharmaceutical industry worldwide. 23 May has been designated as Olle Hansson Day and is celebrated as a day of action in India and several other countries. An Ole Hansson Award is made each year to a Third World person whose action for rational drug policies demonstrate the fine qualities of Olle, whose words, 'Now is the time for Action' will be a rallying call for all times. What this book is about is stated below by the four editors This book is in three parts. The first part is the story of a drug, clioquinol, which ruined many more lives than thalidomide did, but this disaster is much less widely known and its lessons have not yet been learned. The story spans over 20 years, from the early 1960s until now, and is told by Dr. Olle Hansson who became deeply involved in it early on and did more than anyone else to bring it towards a conclusion. The main actors are the patients who were injured, the doctors who prescribed the drug, Ciba-Geigy the Swiss multinational pharmaceutical company which introduced ENTERO- VIOFORM, and the lawyers and Hansson who helped the patients obtain compensation.

It is not only a thrilling story but also raises the question as to whether anything like it could happen again. How exceptional was it? In the second part of the book Dr. Hansson looks at other more recent examples of drug marketing by Ciba-Geigy and other companies to try to answer this question. What is unique here is the wealth of information on the discussion and decision process within Ciba-Geigy. The picture is very less disturbing, but although Hansson himself had much less inside knowledge of other companies, it seems likely that Ciba-Geigy's behaviour was no worse than that of most of its competitors.

Are pharmaceutical companies behaving more responsibly now than in the recent past? How can we tell? Hansson died before he could finish this book, but the last month of his life saw a dramatic development in his long struggle with Ciba-Geigy. The company decided that the top management should meet him personally for discussions and perhaps negotiations.

In the last part of the book Milton Silverman, who interviewed all the chief participants, describes these meetings and the events that followed. 'The fight to get rid of clioquinol increased public awareness of underlying problems in many countries, and in the developing world this encouraged consumers to campaign for more rational use of drugs. Olle Hansson acted as a catalyst and adviser for this movement. For example, as Dr. Mira Shiva of the Voluntary Health Association of India notes: 'The relevance of this fight for right to information, the right to socially just and rational drug use have increasingly made sense to us and many others. If today the drugs issue is increasingly being recognised as a health issue, a consumer issue, it is because we are ourselves convinced about it being so, and can therefore convince others. Olle Hansson facilitated this process. An important characteristic was that he never ignored (my) requests for expert comment, and responded very promptly - even when he was in hospital'. 'Olle Hansson's relationships with the media were another important element in his work. 'He had a way of combining scientific with hard fact and a campaigning zeal that is every reporter's dream. His nose for a story made it easy for him to pick up his way through unnecessary detail and hit where it hurts'. (Joan Shenton, TV journalist, London).

Oliver Gillie, then medical correspondent of the London Sunday Times adds: 'As a journalist I have met many people obsessed by a cause. Such obsession is essential if an individual is going to make battle with governments or large international corporations. Olle Hansson had a righteous cause, and the stamina to see the battle through'.

Barbro Joberger, of Dagens Nyheter, Stockholm, was struck by Hansson's respect for journalists' professional skill: 'Unlike many doctors he had no contempt for journalists. He knew that journalists had their own code of honour. He understood that it was in his own interest to learn as much as possible about the way the media works, so that he could achieve the best results'. What is important now is that all of us should learn the lessons - doctors and other health professionals, administrators of health services, politicians and the public.

The World Health Organisation now has a major programme to encourage the rational use of drugs in all countries, especially the poorest ones. This essential work needs the wholehearted cooperation of the pharmaceutical industry, which has many important contributions to make. If this book helps to improve the ways in which we use medicines. Olle Hansson's hope will have to be realised.