

THE QUALITY OF HUMAN PREFERENCES

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There is a growing need for quality assured consumer products the world over. Although the word quality might have many connotations, quality products are generally accepted as safe and effective for their intended use and benefits should outweigh risks. However, the old saying "One man's meat is another man's poison" still holds water. It is the degree of excellence of a thing that matters. Intelligent consumers look at specification of their preferred commodities.

Scarcity, inaccessibility and inaffordability are the links of a vicious circle that limit equitable distribution and consumption of high quality products.

Lack of unbiased information for the commuter in making correct decisions about his needs often leads to purchasing poor quality goods. Due to powerful advertising campaigns and unethical labelling of goods, the common man could be easily misled. This is a sad situation when one considers essential foods and drugs. In the case of drugs the common man has little choice, as the drug is prescribed by a doctor. Only over the counter drugs are available to him for picking and choosing. Even in this, the detailman could influence his preferences.

The very concept of measuring living standards in terms of what people prefer in food, life style, culture, recreation, etc. as well as priorities, differs on traditional or other grounds among countries in general and between peoples of capitalist and socialist countries in Particular ¹

There are preferential differences in the higher and lower wage earners in many countries. The wage differences are wide in the U. S. and U.K. There are unemployed people. There are human segments in the welfare category or on charity. Hence, measuring the average income or the GNP per capita in order to understand the meaning of the standard of living of a country or community would be less meaningful. The developing countries need not attempt to measure their standard of living by observing, how close they approach the U.K. or any other country's standard of living.

Demands and needs are numerous. Economic, social, health, cultural, political and educational needs have to be satisfied at various stages in one's life. Sometimes the needs become so desperate that they turn out to be demands. Very often political reforms and upheavals determine the quality of human preferences. However the economic, educational and social status of a community has a crucial bearing on determining its standard of living. The crucial importance of health and social indicators such as the infant mortality rate, life expectancy at one year, maternal mortality ratio and the literacy rate has been identified by many social scientists in developing countries. It has been found that economically poor countries could achieve better health and social standards by careful and prudent implementation of socio-economic plans with judicious use of available resources.

Rich industrialized societies are now becoming victims of poor health due to preferential over consump-

tion of affluent diet rich in foods of animal origin and refined cereals. The affluent diet contains more total fat, saturated fat and cholesterol. However, developing countries which still preserve the traditional vegetable and cereal rich diets could enjoy healthy lives as long as they keep away from imitating the life styles of the affluent nations². Cultural antecedents are equally important.

The quality of human preferences depends on educational and intellectual achievements, economic strength, and priority needs of a mature individual. However, the availability and accessibility of desired commodities as well as the easy understanding of unbiased information are important conditioning factors limited to the selection of essential items of life.

Information is crucial for satisfying one's priority needs. But misinformation about norms, standards, criteria, parameters and specifications by way of coloured advanced commercial advertising techniques is widespread in the business oriented world. There are numerous brands of commodities for one product with an identical formulation. There are fake and counterfeit products which could mislead the consumer. The same company which produces a reputed brand product could produce several fake and counterfeit products and blame others for it. We live in a world of show business and imitations. Monalisas are found everywhere for different prices and people tend to satisfy their needs according to their fancies and the availability of easy money.

Quality is generally costly and quality products should meet the intended use of the product to meet the desired objective. The responsibility of all countries and all indi-

"Quality is the crowning virtue of great men and quantity the passion of mean minds"

- J. R. Lowell

viduals is to ensure the continuous survival of a liveable environment respecting the rights of all. In this way alone the opportunity to live and enjoy life could be respected. This approach goes beyond our generation. Ethical limitations need to shatter the forces of technocratic individualism.

Missed opportunities for enjoying quality products are very common in developing countries, because of problems linked to delivery of services, policies on commercial products, lack of information, lack of finances and logistics as well as due to wrong beliefs and attitudes of the inhabitants. The provision of low cost quality essential services and products is a challenge that confronts poor countries. Often the locally manufactured products cannot reach the standards of internationally accepted product standards. Product and process patents are the privileges of a few economically strong big companies. The lack of raw materials and the shortage of qualified trained manpower and equipment in poor countries to undertake good manufacturing and distribution practices often lead to the emergence of low quality products. Unprecedented technical advancements have opened new opportunities for

improving quality standards pertaining to services and products. Knowledge becomes anachronistic and obsolete unless there is a perennial vigilance and search for strategies and techniques by the professionals and academics for updating, refining and developing it. In such a venture the accepted norms and standards might become ethically and scientifically unacceptable lacking cohesion and consistency. Some facile assumptions about quality products today could become invalid and unrealistic in the near future. In such a setting of flux, the sensitivity and perception about quality products would shift to another state of equilibrium and human preferences would reach new dimensions.

The establishment of an appropriate information generation mechanism and information dissemination are a *sine qua non* to the development of quality conscious communities. A holistic and multidisciplinary approach is essential to refine existing client oriented services. When services and commodities become refined, human preferences would improve.

Public interest in quality goods and services is being expressed in diverse ways ranging from individual complaints to mass campaigns. In Sri Lanka for instance letters to the

editors of newspapers contain the grievances of the public.

The professional monolith antitechnology, anti-authority sentiments; lay concerns over abuses in services and nonavailability of professional services are some areas that reveal the nature of public preferences.

Well motivated and informed public preferences could pave way for quality assurance and cost effectiveness of essential services. If the public demand for better services and refined products, the providers have no other choice than responding to their demands. By changing institutions and creating new programmes we can make medical care more accessible and deliver it more efficiently, but the present potential for improving health lies in what we do and don't do for and to ourselves. The choice is ours³. Professor Victor Fuchs' views are applicable to any public service not alone to health.

References

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3. Victor R Fuchs (1974) *Who Shall Live?* New York, Basic Books P 151