

News from here and there

2024 Infosys award laureate for life sciences: Siddhesh Kamat

The Infosys awards for 2024 have been announced. Readers of this newpage are probably familiar with the award (*Natl Med J India* 2019;**32**:63–4; *Natl Med J India* 2023;**36**:135–6). The Infosys Prize in Mathematics was first awarded in 2008. In 2009, the Infosys Science Foundation (ISF), a not-for-profit trust, was set up and three additional categories were incorporated; the prize was then awarded in Life Sciences; in addition to Mathematical Sciences, Physical Sciences and Social Sciences. In 2010, there was a further increase in the number of subjects when Engineering and Computer Science were added. In 2012, a sixth category, Humanities, was another addition and since then, the Infosys award has been awarded in these six categories.

Right from the beginning, the prize has been recognizing mid-career researchers. In 2024, ISF set out to reward early career researchers who are 40 years or younger. The award celebrates the contributions of Indians in research and consists of a gold medal, a citation, and a prize purse of US\$ 100 000 or its equivalent in Indian rupees.

The awards were presented in a ceremony on 11 January 2025 at Bengaluru. The 2024 Prize in Life Sciences was awarded to Siddhesh Kamat, Associate Professor, Department of Biology, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune, where he is also Chairperson, National Facility for Gene Function in Health and Disease, for his discoveries concerning bioactive lipids, their receptors, and their metabolic and signalling pathway in human diseases. Dr Kamat's work showed that dysregulation in lyso-phosphatidylserine (PS), occurring as a result of deleterious mutations in the enzyme involved in its metabolism, has a bearing on the causation of specific neurodegenerative diseases. Kamat's work has also revealed that bioactive lipids also regulate critical processes in the immune system and has identified how the deleterious effects of lipid oxidation are mediated by the metabolism of oxidised PS.

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Government's inaction on misleading health advertisements fuels surge of misinformation

The Right to Information (RTI) response dated 7 November 2023, has shown that the proposed amendments to the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954, remain unimplemented—an issue that has continued to draw criticism in recent analyses published in November–December 2024. This regulatory inaction has contributed to a major proliferation of misleading health advertisements, which have raised concerns among public health experts, consumer rights advocates, and policymakers.

The proposed amendments aim to expand the Act's coverage by incorporating 24 additional diseases and conditions. This expanded scope is intended to address a range of misleading claims, including those related to skin fairness, height

enhancement, anti-ageing solutions, and improved sexual performance. By broadening the regulatory framework, the government seeks to close longstanding loopholes that allow advertisers to promote unverified health benefits with little accountability.

In addition to widening the Act's scope, the amendments propose the imposition of stricter penalties. Under the new provisions, first-time offenders could face fines of up to 1 000 000 (10 lakhs) and imprisonment of up to 2 years, while repeat violations may result in fines of up to 5 000 000 (50 lakhs) and jail terms extending to 5 years. These measures are designed to strengthen deterrence and ensure that advertisers are held accountable for making false or misleading claims.

A recent controversy involving ayurvedic eye drops further highlights the urgency of the situation. The product claimed to cure conditions such as glaucoma and cataracts, without sufficient scientific evidence, prompting a warning from the Supreme Court. This incident has reinforced calls from both legal authorities and industry experts for stricter enforcement of the existing regulations.

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has consistently flagged numerous instances of deceptive health claims. However, its role remains primarily advisory, as they have limited power over legal enforcement. Meanwhile, the Drugs and Magic Remedies Act, which was originally designed to curb deceptive health advertisements in a pre-digital era, has struggled to keep pace with modern digital marketing strategies. As a result, unverified health claims can now spread rapidly across various platforms.

Consumer protection groups warn that misleading health advertisements may lead individuals to adopt unproven treatments, potentially delaying the adoption of appropriate, evidence-based medical care. Public health experts emphasize that comprehensive regulatory reforms, along with robust enforcement mechanisms, are key to mitigating the risks associated with digital misinformation in healthcare.

Despite increasing consumer complaints and expert recommendations, the regulatory framework has not been updated to address these emerging challenges. Until the proposed amendments are implemented and enforced, misleading health advertisements are likely to continue proliferating, thus posing significant risks to public health and undermining consumer trust.

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Maharashtra Medical Council comes down on misuse of social media by registered medical practitioners

The Maharashtra Medical Council (MMC) has announced stringent action against registered medical practitioners who indulge in misuse of social media.

In light of several complaints received from patients, regarding

misleading and deceptive advertisements as well as misuse of social media by registered medical practitioners such as offering false guarantees for treating serious illnesses such as cancer, which not only exploit patient trust but also violate ethical norms. The increasing trend of registered medical practitioners using third-party platforms to promote themselves with misleading claims and posting patient images and testimonials and 'likes', has also been a concern.

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***MAL* functioning gene identification leads to discovery of a new blood group**

Louise Tilley, Senior Research Scientist, IBGRL Red Cell Reference at NHS Blood and Transplant, UK and her colleagues from University of Bristol have discovered a rare new blood group. They published their findings in the journal *Blood* in December 2024 (Tilley LA, Karamatic Crew V, Mankelow TJ, AlSubhi SA, Jones B, Borowski A, *et al.* Deletions in the *MAL* gene result in loss of Mal protein, defining the rare inherited AnWj-negative blood group phenotype. *Blood* 2024;**144**:2735–47. doi: 10.1182/blood.2024025099.).

They document the existence of an extremely rare inherited

blood group found in patients with genetic deletions on the myelin and lymphocyte (*MAL*) protein. *MAL* protein, an integral multi-pass membrane proteolipid, functions in maintaining the stability of, and in assisting cell transport across, cell membranes. It has a surface antigen AnWj which appears shortly after birth in 99.9% individuals. AnWj, which can be transiently suppressed from expression after prolonged illnesses and immuno-suppressive therapy, is a high prevalence red cell antigen found in almost all humans. Its absence was first identified in 1972 on the blood sample of a pregnant woman. This absence, to be permanently inherited as an AnWj negative phenotype is extremely rare, with only 9 cases being reported over the past 5 decades. Tilley and her group used whole exome sequencing on 5 genetically AnWj-negative individuals, to conclude the antigen was absent due to homozygous deletions in the *MAL* gene. 5 unrelated AnWj-negative patients in the study shared the same mutation. Since the AnWj antigen is carried on the *MAL* protein, the researchers named this newly discovered blood group with the absent AnWj antigen as MAL blood group.

MAL blood group is inherited as an autosomal recessive disorder. Its identification adds yet another layer to the expanding knowledge of rare, inherited blood disorders and will hopefully help reduce transfusion-related reactions across the world.

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