As this editorial is being written, the Ministry of AYUSH, Government of India has entered into an agreement for collaborative activities in the area of Traditional Medicine with the World Health Organization (WHO), Geneva. This is a strategic decision long overdue. It will help to improve branding and international acceptability of AYUSH systems. Formal collaboration with WHO will entail responsibility on the Government of India to engage in capacity building, advocacy and dissemination of information alongside facilitating scientific research, education, skill development as well as professional practice both in India as well as amongst the Member States of the WHO. Through this milestone agreement it will be possible to create synergies with WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2014–2023 and strengthen global visibility of AYUSH systems. This agreement is the second major global milestone, after the United Nations approved June 21st as International Yoga Day last year.

As we know, WHO is the directing and coordinating authority on international health within the United Nations' system comprising of 194 countries. It provides leadership on global health focused on capacity building, shaping health research agendas, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends. The WHO recognizes research institutes, universities or academies as collaborating centres to carry out supporting activities in line with its mission. The WHO Collaborating Centers play major role in knowledge generation and dissemination of information worldwide.

For last several years the Office of Traditional Medicine of WHO was mainly represented by Chinese officials. Because of strategic and tactical patronage, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) was able to make effective inroads in global academia and markets. As a result, many WHO monographs have been published covering terminology, guidelines and research for TCM. These official monographs have been used as effective tools to increase awareness and acceptability of TCM in member countries.

Strengthening AYUSH

In contrast to TCM, visibility of AYUSH is grossly insignificant. For instance, there are nine WHO collaborating centers in TCM while India has just two for AYUSH. Many thought leaders like Sam Pitroda, K Kasturirangan, R A Mashelkar, Gerald Bodeker, Darshan Shankar, Ram Harsh Singh, Ashok Vaidya and late Ranjit Roy Chaudhury had been stressing the need to establish strong presence of AYUSH in the WHO system to internationally promote Indian interests in this sector. So far AYUSH has not been formally represented at Geneva or SEARO. Few successes so far at the WHO are mainly due to efforts of Dinesh Chandra Katoch who was the first official at the country office of WHO in New Delhi. Although, his tenure was very short, during this period, India could get two WHO Collaborating Centers, one at Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga in New Delhi and one for Ayurveda at Gujarat Ayurved University because of efforts of persons like M S Baghel.

The proposed agreement with WHO can facilitate creation of strategic and tactical positions within the WHO system. India can now undertake development of WHO technical reports, monographs and other publications for better international acceptability of AYUSH systems. This might include benchmarks for training in Yoga; clinical practice in Ayurveda Panchakarma, Siddha, Naturopathy, Sowa-Rigpa and Unani medicine. In the long-term this collaboration could facilitate multilateral collaboration for development of AYUSH therapeutics. This agreement if strategically executed is expected to immensely benefit the AYUSH systems in India and abroad.

The newly established Ministry of AYUSH has the mandate to promote, propagate and globalize the recognized AYUSH Systems. The AYUSH task force report chaired by Dr. HR Nagendra has prepared a road map. Let’s expect this roadmap will be implemented to establish India’s credentials in holistic and integrative healthcare.

J-AIM recognizes laudable efforts done by the Minister, Secretary, Joint Secretaries and Advisors of Ministry of AYUSH in developing the WHO agenda. All the stakeholders from the sector will have to work hard in synergy to take maximum advantage of this strategic step taken by the Government. WHO publications on basic terminologies, databases for global practitioners, documents for a network of international regulators, will need to be developed. To prepare robust protocols, guidelines and clinical documentation is herculean task. It will need empowered champions to form international teams to prioritize and complete the task in a time bound manner. We need to involve AYUSH ambassadors abroad mainly from Europe and the Americas who are already doing commendable work in this direction. The Swiss model that led to recognition to Ayurveda is an exemplary development in a country where WHO headquarters is situated. Similar efforts are underway in Italy, Germany and Russia among few other countries. The Ministry will have to address the challenges in increasing critical mass of competent experts, capacity building and promoting scholarship in the
sector. This will need open, inclusive and transdisciplinary approach. In this context few important steps need to be recognized.

AYUSH, Integration and SDGs

Importance of integrative approach was endorsed by none other than Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi twice in a span of one month. First, at the inauguration of International Conference on Frontiers in Yoga Research and its Applications 2016 organized by S-VYASA University at Bengaluru and second time at the Global Ayurveda Festival at Kozhikode. This grand vision needs to be properly reflected in the new 2016 integrative National Health Policy expected to be announced this year.

In February 2016, A National Consultation on Road to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was jointly organized by Research in Information Systems for Developing Countries (RIS), NITI Ayog and United Nations. The United Nation’s SDG 3 aims to provide for healthy lives and promotion of well-being for all. Through SDG 3, the United Nations sketches an optimistic agenda for universal health coverage by facilitating access to safe and effective medicines. Many SDG goals need an integrated approach for their achievement. AYUSH can contribute to accomplish SDG 3 on ‘health and well-being for all’.

Here are few other notable events in last three months in the direction of global recognition. A two day India-US Workshop on Traditional Medicine was organized during March 3–4, 2016 in New Delhi. Senior representatives from the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Global Affairs, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Cancer Institute (NCI) and several academic institutions from U.S. and India participated in this important activity. Another notable event included a two day conference on AYUSH during April 13–14, 2016, graced by presence of Prime Minister of Mauritius Dr Ameenah Gurib-Fakim and Indian AYUSH Minister Shripad Yesso Naik among many other dignitaries. More recently, a mini symposium organized by the NIH/NCI on May 3, 2016, where your Editor-in-Chief led the presentations on the evidence based research on traditional medicine.

At present, AYUSH system has five Universities, more than half a million of trained practitioners, more than 250 institutions, and thousands of clinics. However, lot has to be done to contribute to Indian public health system. True potential of AYUSH needs to be explored to make India the world leader in affordable and accessible health care as expected by SDGs. Another notable initiative has been taken by Dr Soumya Swaminathan, Secretary, Department of Health Research, Government of India who proposed a joint AYUSH-ICMR Mission to generate research leads that can impact the world of medicine.

Enhancing Global Visibility

Efforts for enhancing high quality scientific research and evidence base for safety and efficacy of AYUSH medicine must be expeditious if we wish to optimally enable these developments. At present, AYUSH presence in reputed scientific database like PubMed and Scopus is very limited. We need concerted efforts to improve scientific credibility and visibility of AYUSH systems at a global level. To contribute a bit in this important task, J-AIM has taken major decisions.

Starting from January 2016, J-AIM will be published by world’s largest and most reputed publishing house - Elsevier. This change over will drastically increase acceptance and visibility of J-AIM and in turn Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine in the international arena. Elsevier is the world’s leading publisher with over 2500 journals and 33,000 book titles having iconic archive value. Elsevier also hosts well known scientific search engines and database like Science Direct, Scimago and Scopus. With its first issue published in January 2010, J-AIM has now become a preferred journal in the disciplines of Ayurveda, integrative medicine, traditional, complementary and alternative medicine. According to Google Scholar matrix, J-AIM is one of top three journals in integrative medicine sector with contributions from more than 40 countries.

World Ayurveda Foundation (WAF) and Foundation for Revitalization of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) Bangalore have joined hands to facilitate transition of J-AIM in the next orbit. The WAF organizes ‘World Ayurveda Congress’ every alternate year attracts over 4000 delegates from India and abroad, which is traditionally inaugurated by the Prime Minister of India. Soon J-AIM will announce special privileges for its subscribers and also for WAF delegates. We hope that all these positive developments happening right in the beginning of the year 2016 might be omens for an awaited renaissance of AYUSH in India for global health.

In the spirit of ancient wisdom we wish to invite suggestions and active participation from well-wishers of J-AIM - let’s work together with prodigious energy and intellect with no animosity for the protection of health and sustained peace.

Bhushan Patwardhan
Interdisciplinary School of Health Sciences,
Savitribai Phule Pune University,
Pune, Maharashtra,
India

E-mail address: bpatwardhan@gmail.com.

Available online 29 May 2016