We, the people, continue to look at the advances in health sciences, pharmacology, medicine and surgery. We continue to discuss vehemently about whether the government should or should not subsidize healthcare. Our current economic model strives for more growth at all costs. Interestingly, more expenditure by the healthcare industry would create more jobs, more drugs and GDP growth. We might say, this is exactly what we want. We, however, miss the other side of the story completely in the process.

Let us take a sample case of obesity statistics in the US. The numbers are: two children out of every three are obese – says the finding. What does this mean to the economy? These children eat more than what they need and they eat food that they do not need. All this is good to the economy in today’s parlance. Food industry benefits, may be makes money, may be creates more jobs. What happens to the healthcare industry? Healthcare industry also does well in the process; these children need more of doctor’s attention and need more medicines, increasing the pharmaceutical industries’ revenues and margins and possibly jobs that the industry can provide. For an economist – who cares for the economy and not for people, “all is well”! What happens to people in the process? Children live a suboptimal life, do not enjoy the way they live and are at best miserable. While this scenario flourishes in the US and the western world, many of those is the developing world – especially those below the poverty line do not even have sufficient food to eat and could well die of hunger. And this is just one of the many significant challenges haunting the food and health industry.
What does all this mean? Can we easily say the food and health industry – in the name of making profits and growth - has forgotten the “why” of their existence? This industry is supposed to serve people and keep them healthy. It seems very clear that relationship between “health” of health and food industries and “health” of people is inversely proportional! You can almost be certain that people are doing badly if the health industry is doing well? That is not why this industry was born in the first place – I’m sure.

One might argue about tremendous progress in these sciences and therefore benefits are being delivered to humanity. Let us look at some very practical observations. Most deaths and diseases across the world are caused by bad water and bad air. In ecological terms – this means, the planet is losing its capacity to provide these ecological services. Destruction of ecosystems across the world through serious human intervention is making it harder for nature to provide us these “free” services. In economic terms even if we divert a small % of money locked up in drug discovery and high end research on “rare” diseases and use this for making clean drinking water available to the masses, possibly using ecological restoration, we would have done yeomen service to the wellbeing of the humanity. The leverage for funding clean water projects through projects such as restoration of stream and river ecosystems for example - is so high compared to exotic drug research that anybody wanting to do any good to human beings will not even think twice. However the current economic model does not allow us to see that it can happen, economics overrules common sense!

Same is true with airborne diseases! Especially those related to air pollution. Our economics wants more roads (destruction of habitats and ecosystems), more vehicles on road (even more destruction of ecosystems as we mine more iron) and more use of these vehicles - more exploitation of natural capital - i.e. Fossil fuels. This leads to growth of automobile industry, leading to more jobs and is good for people one might say! This is leading to high GHG emissions and the mega challenges like the Climate change. This leads to more airborne diseases with more polluted air. This means more people take more medicines, good for the pharmaceutical industry, which can benefit and create more jobs! What happens to more people getting sick and Nature getting
sicker and exhausted is nobody’s bother.

There are many more examples that we can cite – and that does not need anything more than common sense. It certainly looks like there is something seriously wrong the way our current day economics works. While it provides unlimited luxury to the few – at the expense of nature and other people, it robs nature of its very capacity to provide us with “eco-services”, and large part of humanity their right to live.

It is very likely that many a common man like me is indeed thinking of what I have tried to put down in writing. Most might even believe that the argument makes some reasonable sense. The difficulty we all run into – is what do we therefore do? Is there any option in which one can go back to wellbeing of the planet, her ecosystems, diversity and therefore health of human beings? Are there any ways in which one can change the way we look at the current “economics” and more specifically health economics to find some lasting solutions? Do we have the right measures of health? As Scientists would always argue, all depends on what you measure. You will be able to monitor and control – if at all this is the right term to use – what you measure and the basis of your measurement. How true, I say! What we measure (read diagnose) is not “how healthy a person is” but whether he has any disease. Health is certainly not absence of disease. There are no attempts specifically made to measure how healthy a person is. The limits and measurements always tell you about how you are NOT healthy - that is say your Cholesterol level > x means you have a problem. There are no active measures of suggesting to a seemingly healthy person, how she can be healthier! Moreover the current economic model to keep the people healthy (if it does that at all) is quite flawed. Health services revenue - the way these are essentially structured today will add to the “health” of economy as it treats more and more patients and more and more difficult to cure diseases. A strange measurement I must say. The health of the human race must be measured by % of healthy population rather than (say) length of life! Today, in almost all the places on earth - doctors get paid more as more people get sick. A few exceptions would be those who focus on diet, nutrition and exercise for example. The incentive for doctors to do well - is when there are indeed more and sicker people as it is true for pharmaceutical industry. The focus
is very clearly on curative medicine, rather than preventive and health encouraging practices. If the Doctors get rewarded for keeping the people healthy (before they become patients . . .) and are punished when these people become sick, doctors will naturally have a strong economic reason to care for patients’ health – proactively. While this looks simple and logical this has not been practiced ever in modern history. This has indeed been a practice adapted by ancient Chinese doctors.

May be we will change the incentive structure for doctors but what will we do when patients have to breathe the same polluted air and drink the same polluted water? The question then goes back to the current economic model – which I argue is substantially flawed. If the model encourages the industry to “exploit” more of what we would like to preserve and provides “free” access to the natural resources, we cannot expect anything to be different. It is time to look at ways and means to make a transition from the current model to a model which will work and can take us to sustainable future.

As we know more and more about the tipping points around maintaining the health of the planet, we must look at alternative ways of how our business and industry functions. If we are able to measure (e.g.) the cost of diseases due to polluted water and air, or unavailability of water altogether and decide to correct the root cause, we indeed can take efforts in that direction. If restoring water sources is the least expensive way to eventually get access to good quality water round the year – that might be the way to go! If restoration of ecosystems is going to help us provide improved air quality, that is what we must do in order to improve air quality. If restoration of natural habitats is going to help improve earth’s ability to absorb waste, let us not allow the vultures to die. These seem to be the fundamental actions that we must take to be able to meet some of our big challenges.

We seem to be locked into an economic system, which is making even a conscientious individual have limited options. Do we need to therefore rethink our economics in a more holistic manner? Economics is supposed to help us live well and not be a standalone “operating system” which thinks about the means but not the ends. If we consider happiness arising out of good health, good food, being part of the community, being part of the family, wholesome entertainment, being with nature and peace
are desirable end points as they certainly are – let these end points drive our economic system rather than the weird economics of today, which seems to be making all these end points harder to reach!

Human well being is so closely linked to well being of the planet – that they are almost inseparable. It looks like we have forgotten the first principles of science and the cause and effect relationship. Economics has transgressed the rationale - is the only conclusion we can draw in the process!

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