

A pumpkin for the doctor

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In the small Ayurvedic clinic of ayurvedic

doctor Suvinay Damle in Kudal, 370-odd kilometres off Pune, pumpkins, coconuts and gourds jostle for space with bottled medicinal concoctions. The farm produce is what Damle gets as his consultation fee. When he began his practice 18 years ago, Damle encouraged poor villagers, who came to him for treatment and medicines, to pay in kind if money was a problem. "Some of the ayurvedic medicines can be expensive and out of reach for many villagers. So, I started asking them to bring whatever was surplus in their homes as payment," he says. Word spread fast and patients would often bring groundnuts, coconuts, ghee, oil, pumpkins, gourds and more in lieu of the Rs 100 consultation fee. "Some even bring me gomutra (cow urine) and gobar (cow dung). Even that is of use for me," he says. About 10 per cent of his patients today pay him in kind. A 70-year-old patient once sent him a kharatha broom that she had made after Damle treated her for a persistent fever. He received 14 kilograms of organic rice from a patient, while another gifted him a huge cucumber-like gourd. To his surprise, one person once brought him a big box of saffron. "That saffron would have been worth close to Rs 700. I cannot put a price to these gifts; it is all about the faith that they have in me," he says. This barter system has, over the years, helped wean villagers away from quacks, says Damle. A small kiosk inside his clinic sells ayurvedic staples like chyavanprash and other herbal preparations. "Due to this barter system, the villagers can spend their money to buy other (allopathic) medicines that they otherwise couldn't have," he says. Up a narrow stairway in the clinic is a tiny 'dhyamandir', where patients relax and their children play, while they wait for their turn to meet the doctor. The dhyamandir and another panchakarma room are surrounded by bamboo panels that sport beautiful Warli designs. "These were made by a villager for the clinic. He even built a steam chamber for me that has lasted for years," he says. Born in Sindhudurg district, 44-year-old Damle studied ayurvedic medicine in Sawantwadi. He says his barter system and religious faith have kept him in good stead throughout his practice. "I get more than what I expect. Most of what I get can be used in my house," he says of his 'fee'. "These villagers may be poor, but they have strong egos. They feel hurt if they don't pay for my services." Damle also makes weekly visits to the nearby villages of Vengurla and Mankuli, as well as a monthly stop at his Mumbai clinic, to treat patients there. [First Published in : The Indian Express, Sun Dec 11 2011](#)

Watch a talk Barter is Better (in Marathi) by this practitioner.