Balu Sankaran
(4 September 1926–20 June 2012)

A TEACHER PASSES ON

One day, towards the end of a busy outpatient day there was suddenly a flutter of activity in the orthopaedic department of Safdarjung Hospital. ‘Dr Sankaran, the Prime Minister, Mrs Gandhi, is here to meet you.’ Dr Sankaran replied, ‘How come? Good evening, Madam. Hope all is well. You could at least have sent word that you are coming.’ Mrs Gandhi said, ‘Everything is fine. I need to take a thumb X-ray.’ Midway through the X-ray, her secretary reminded her that all the ministers had arrived at Parliament House and were waiting for the Cabinet meeting she had called. ‘Oh, tell them that I am at Safdarjung Hospital to see Dr Sankaran. I’ll come in a little while.’

The message was loud and clear to everyone. Even Mrs Gandhi goes to the hospital to consult Dr Sankaran, so they should not be troubling him to travel after a busy day to see them at home. The Prime Minister herself! Visiting the hospital on an outpatient day to drive home a message to her colleagues about respecting Dr Sankaran’s time! That was the respect he commanded at the height of his career.

Tall in stature, short in height, Dr Balu Sankaran was head and shoulders above many, not just in India but internationally. A graduate of Stanley Medical College, Chennai (1948) he stood first in the university in all three professional examinations. When he passed his MBBS, he was the best outgoing student with 17 prizes including 13 gold medals. He wanted to join the Public Service Commission in Madras but was advised to do a postgraduation. His own uncle, Dr Narasimha Iyer had done his postgraduation abroad. He applied to the Columbia Presbyterian University. Dr Alan DeForest Smith, the then director of the Department of Orthopaedics, saw the number of gold medals he had and found it too good to be true. Being unsure of the credentials of the college, he called up the then delegate of India to the United Nations, Dr B.N. Rao to confirm the credentials of Madras University. On 22 October 1950, Dr Sankaran got a cable from Columbia Presbyterian that he could join as a resident on 1 January 1951. His eldest daughter Suhasini was born on the 1 January 1951. On duty days he could return only after 48 hours and from Saturday morning duties he could return only on Monday evening! The hospital being a referral centre would get all kinds of congenital problems of children as well as trauma cases. According to Dr Sankaran, the most important part of learning there was how to handle patients. His boss, Dr Frank E. Stinchfield, looked after several VIP patients including the wife of the then French Prime Minister, Pierre Mendes-France, and the famous music composer Irving Berlin. Once, when Dr Sankaran was going to remove the stitches of a patient she angrily said: ‘I do not want this black doctor to remove my stitches.’ Frank Stinchfield was emphatic in his reply, ‘He is my best doctor. I am not going to do it. Only he will do it and you will be quiet.’

His wife Sukanya Sankaran and daughter Suhasini could join him only six months later. Once, when he was on the way to get milk powder for his daughter, someone picked his pocket. That was salary day and he lost the entire salary of US$ 125. Dr Alan DeForest Smith learnt about this on 4 September, his birthday. He scolded him and said ‘When you are here I am your father. You should have come to me.’ He then gave Dr Sankaran money for the month. In 1952, as a second year resident he got US$ 150. That was also the year when his second daughter was born.

He was named the Annie C. Kane fellow in 1953, essentially working like a senior resident. He handled all types of trauma patients, the most common surgery being Jewett nail-plates for inter-trochanteric fractures. Upper limb fractures were essentially nailed. Cold abscess drainage for tuberculosis spine was very common. In December 1954, he appeared for the FRCS examination in Canada. The theory examination was in Toronto while the practical examination was in Montreal. On the day of his viva-voce there were 12 candidates and he was last in the row. The examiners, all senior professors, said sorry one by one to each candidate till they reached Dr Sankaran. They had his theory marks with them and they exclaimed, ‘Ninety-eight per cent in Anatomy! Brilliant!’ Needless to say, he passed. He became the first Indian to get an FRCS from Canada. They immediately offered him a job at US$ 10 000 per year as Assistant Professor. Dr Sankaran told them he was keen to go back to India as there were only 14 orthopaedic surgeons in India, and he wished to go and serve his people.

Back at Columbia, he finished his fellowship and Dr Frank Stinchfield arranged a fellowship for him with Sir John Charnley. John Charnley felt he was overqualified to be a registrar but he took him on. In February 1956, Balu Sankaran resigned from Columbia Presbyterian and left for Manchester.

When he arrived at Manchester station he was received by Sir John Charnley himself with ‘Hello Balu, I am Sir John Charnley.’ He drove him in his own car, a red sports car, and dropped him at his house at Clifton Road. At the hospital he was in Sir John Charnley’s unit. David Lloyd Griffith was head of another unit. Dr Sankaran would recall that Sir John Charnley (JC) was ‘the most brilliant man’. As a surgeon he was very fast and there would be minimal blood loss. He would do three to four major surgeries in a day. While in England, Dr Sankaran was keen on getting an FRCS there but JC scolded him ‘Balu why do you want to collect degrees? It is not worth collecting letters.’ JC was blunt: ‘Balu you know more than those b***!’ Sir Osmond Clark was a friend of
JC and Dr Sankaran also did a stint in his unit. He was with JC for 11 months starting before Easter.

With JC he learnt many surgeries—arthrodesis of the knee, tendon transfers, lower limb surgery for poliomyelitis, shoulder arthrodesis and arthroplasties of the hip. At that time, JC was only beginning his work on total hip replacements.

Dr Sankaran was keen on returning to India. On 16 December 1955, he went back to Stanley Medical College as there was no orthopaedic surgeon there. The director of medical education suggested he go to Tanjore as they were building a new medical college. But the buildings were just coming up there, so he went to Manipal to join as an assistant professor in anatomy. While there, he saw the advertisement for an orthopaedic surgeon at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) and applied for it. Dr A. Lakshmanaswamy Mudaliar was then the chair of the AIIMS Board and the Vice Chancellor of Madras University. Dr Mudaliar interviewed him and he was selected as Assistant Professor at AIIMS in 1956. There were no wards for orthopaedics and surgery departments in AIIMS. These departments were run from Safdarjung Hospital. Dr P.K. Duraiswamy was the Head of Department and Medical Superintendent at Safdarjung Hospital. At AIIMS, Dr Prakash Chandra became head in 1961. Central Institute of Orthopaedics (CIO) was formed at Safdarjung Hospital in 1959 under Dr P.K. Duraiswamy. Dr Sankaran became the second director of the CIO.

In 1961, Dr Sankaran went back to the USA as a Rockefeller Fellow. There he did research on vitamin D. The one-year fellowship was extended by one more year. He then joined back at AIIMS in 1963. In 1963, Mrs Gandhi had neck pain. Dr Sankaran was called in. He saw her at AIIMS. He started her on cervical traction. She did not want to wear a cervical collar. He suggested that she wear her saree pallu over the collar. That became a fashion, with many society ladies having neck pain wearing a cervical collar and donning a stole or a saree pallu wrapped over it. Pandit Nehru would regularly enquire from Dr Sankaran about Indira’s progress. ‘She will become all right, no?’ was a regular query. Once she became all right, Pandit Nehru invited Dr Sankaran to tea with him. But before the day of the appointment, Pandit Nehru died.

Working in AIIMS gave Dr Sankaran the opportunity to practise the skills he had picked up in the USA and UK. The postgraduates working in the department were lucky to be exposed to the latest international concepts in orthopaedics. His fame spread far and wide and not only the masses but also the VIPs thronged his OPD regularly. The VVIPs and the VIPs came to the same outpatient room where he saw the poor patients. Once, one of the Bollywood stars, Asha Parekh, called up to seek an appointment with him. The news spread like wildfire that Asha Parekh was coming to see Dr Sankaran. Many hospital staff were keen to be around when she came. She came from Bombay on the appointed day, consulted him, and went away without even the slightest fluster from Dr Sankaran. Dr Sankaran was as normal with the VIPs as he was with the very poor that came to him. To him all that mattered was the patient. In fact, his wife recalls Dr Sankaran asking her ‘Who is this Asha Parekh?’

His surgical skills were legendary. He was a bold and fast surgeon. He was doing spine surgery at a time when many feared to do it. Many a scoliotic child benefited from his skill at doing Harrington instrumentation. The skills of corrective surgery that he picked up from JC were put to good use on all the patients with polio and other children with deformities.

His clinical skills were also legendary. Cases that could not be diagnosed elsewhere came to him. Rare syndromes were as common in his outpatient department as regular cases seen elsewhere. His first postgraduate joined him in 1963. The postgraduates benefited from the kind of cases that came to him. He was a keen teacher, and assisting him in the outpatient or the theatre meant that you had to be prepared to face the volley of questions that came from him.

His questions were invariably difficult to answer. You could not find the answers to his questions easily even in books. His morning classes were famous. At a time when there were limited transportation facilities, postgraduates flocked to his early morning classes held at his home on Zakir Hussain Marg in New Delhi. The class would start at 4.30 a.m. and everybody would reach there without complaining. The unearthly hour did not matter. Dr Sankaran’s class was all that mattered. It was worth attending at any time! Those were the days when travel abroad was rare. Workshops and continuing medical education programmes were a rarity. He also became examiner to various universities. He was a guest instructor at the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons in 1962–63. He was also an external auditor at the American Board of Orthopedic Surgeons in 1964.

In 1967, he joined Maulana Azad Medical College as Professor and remained there till he became director of the CIO in 1970. He was instrumental in making it the most famous orthopaedic centre in the country. Nearly all international experts in orthopaedics visited Safdarjung Hospital at that time.

The year 1971 saw the horrors of war in Bangladesh. The then Prime Minister Mrs Gandhi sought the advice of Dr Sankaran for rehabilitation of war victims. He visited several injured and took care of them. There were several amputees and Dr Sankaran realized that good quality orthotics and prosthetics were not available in India. That thought was the beginning of the Artificial Limb Manufacturing Corporation of India (ALIMCO), which became a reality in 1972.

He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1972. He also became the President of the Indian Orthopaedic Association. In 2007 he was awarded the Padma Vibhushan by the President of India. He was the third doctor and the first orthopaedic surgeon to have received this, the second highest civilian award after the Bharat Ratna.

Many would use the proximity to VIPs for personal gains, but not Dr Sankaran. He kept thinking of how to reach out to the poor. He convinced Mrs Gandhi of the need to create a rehabilitation training centre in a rural area. That saw the birth of the National Institute of Research and Training in Rehabilitation at Olaipur, Cuttack in Odisha. In recognition of his contributions to the field of orthotics, prosthetics and rehabilitation he was made the Vice President of the International Society for Orthotics and Prosthetics (ISPO).

The year 1975 saw emergency being clamped in India and in 1977 the government changed. Mr Morarji Desai took over as Prime Minister. Because of his skills, Mr Desai also sought Dr Sankaran’s counsel on health matters and in 1978 he was appointed as Director General of Health Services, Government of India.

In 1981, he was appointed director in one of the largest divisions of WHO, Geneva. He had been nominated for the Ira Hiscock Oration at the University of Hawaii in 1979, and in 1983, he became a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii. He retired from that position in 1987. He could have moved to the USA at that time but chose to come back to India and work in St Stephen’s Hospital, a mission hospital taking care of poor patients rather than join a corporate hospital. Here also he established clinics and wards for poor patients with paralytic poliomyelitis.
and cerebral palsy. His priority was the poor. He ensured that they received good care. The neglected poor were at the heart of his activities. He was invited to train surgeons in Myanmar for rehabilitating leprosy patients. He spent hours in the evenings making transparencies for his trip to Myanmar. He anticipated that projection facilities would not be available in the remote area he was going to. He was good at making sketches and he made multicoloured drawings on transparencies to teach anatomy and tendon transfers in patients with Hansen disease. He felt orthotics and prosthetics was a neglected area and wanted training programmes in that area. He was sent by the WHO to train prosthetists in limb fitting for amputees.

As a retired person and as an emeritus, one would imagine Dr Sankaran would rest on his laurels. But he was keen to do research even after his retirement. He prepared research proposals and applied for grants. He won a research grant for a project looking at physioanthropometric measurements of hips and knees of the Indian population. As principal investigator on research projects to the Technology Mode in Rehabilitation of the Department of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, he investigated over 1000 patients for design of orthopaedic implants for Indian patients. Every evening he could be found carefully examining MRIs and CT scans of people from across the country and taking careful measurements of bones and joints of the hips and knees. It was really inspiring to see his attention to detail and his dedication and hard work. The research was completed and the results were presented by him at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons.

Except for a brief period, Dr Sankaran continued to be Professor Emeritus at St Stephen’s Hospital till he moved back to his wife’s home town Tuticorin (Thoothukudi) in 2008. When he finally left Delhi he was given a farewell tea at Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh’s house. As a surgeon he had met and taken care of some problem or the other for every prime minister of India except Dr V.P. Singh. In 2011 his health began to fail him. The family was keen to move him from Tuticorin, a relatively smaller town, to a major city for a possible medical emergency. Chennai was an option. That meant selling their house. They tried disposing of their house in Tuticorin but that was a long ordeal. Being impeccably honest, he refused to accept any black money in payment for the sale of his house. The result was that he could only sell his house after a delay of over two years and at a substantially lower price than the market price. He stuck to his principle: ‘I shall not accept any black money.’

Towards the end his memory was failing and even then he would keep talking about teaching. Born one day before Teachers’ Day, birthday wishes to him from his students often befittingly spilled over to Teachers’ Day. He always took pride in saying that 65 of his students were professors worldwide. He was a born clinical teacher and throughout his life he kept teaching students who gathered around him. But with failing memory and in Chennai, away from his students, his health suddenly deteriorated. Even as he was losing consciousness he would keep repeating ‘Take me to the class. Where are the students?’ Yes, where are the students?

After a brief period of coma he concluded his teaching at 10.30 a.m. on 20 June 2012. Dr Sankaran is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.

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Obituaries

Many doctors in India practise medicine in difficult areas under trying circumstances and resist the attraction of better prospects in western countries and in the Middle East. They die without their contributions to our country being acknowledged.

The National Medical Journal of India wishes to recognize the efforts of these doctors. We invite short accounts of the life and work of a recently deceased colleague by a friend, student or relative. The account in about 500 to 1000 words should describe his or her education and training and highlight the achievements as well as disappointments. A photograph should accompany the obituary.

—Editor