Obituary

S. Narayana Bhat
(3 May 1947–28 December 2012)

Dr Bhat, a general practitioner in Bellare (a small village in Karnataka), was crushed to death instantaneously, along with his brother under a speeding bus at around midnight while returning home after attending a function at his parents’ place. He is survived by his wife, a son and a daughter.

Born in a small village near Uppinangadi, about 50 km from Mangalore, Dr Bhat had his pre-university education in nearby schools and joined Mysore Medical College in 1964 along with me. We shared the fun and pain of nearly 6 years of the medical course and internship. We then went our own ways. He started practising in Uppinangadi town and I in the village where he would practise later. His practice there was not very busy.

When I thought of joining government service as a prerequisite for doing postgraduation because of my interest in psychiatry (we did not have residency programmes then), I asked him to take over my practice, but he refused. Yet, a year later, he did shift to the place and established himself as a popular general practitioner. Although it was a market centre for several villages in a 10 km radius, the village was remote, not well connected to any big town and people depended upon him for their lives. Almost no night passed without a house visit, which had to be on foot because roads were non-existent or primitive. Referral to bigger hospitals was often not an option. He carried on with a light heart and a keen sense of humour. I never saw him worried or angry. He won people’s hearts with his sincerity and hard work and his practice flourished. He was truly a poor man’s doctor. Slowly, he became an indispensable figure in that rural community. There could be no better proof of his popularity than the fact that all the shops in the village market and nearby areas downed the shutters as soon as the news of his death reached there, probably the only occasion they did so voluntarily in recent history.

Although I lived in a nearby town after my retirement, I could not meet him for a long time. On 26 December 2012, I was passing through his village and decided to drop by his clinic to say hello. He was about to leave for some work but cancelled it and invited me home for a cup of coffee. We talked for sometime and updated each other with details of our lives. He phoned me the next day to ask whether I could visit a relative’s home about 25 km away for a psychiatric consultation. I was going to Mangalore on a motorbike when he called, and the place was on the way. I said I would go there on my return journey. Although I said it was not necessary, he insisted on coming there to introduce me to his relatives. It was getting dark as I finished examining the patient and he was worried that I would be going on a motorbike at night. I assured him I would have no problem. I was reminded of the day nearly 38 years back, when there was a rumour in the village that I had met with a motorcycle accident in Delhi with my wife and child. Narayana made frantic efforts to telephone me and, having failed to get through, sent a telegram asking me ‘to wire my health’.

At around midnight on the day of his death, I received a call on my mobile phone but could not make out what was being said. The call came again after 15 minutes and this time my wife received it. But she too could not make out the words. When I saw the news of his death in the newspapers the next morning, I realized that someone must have tried to contact me on checking his mobile phone after the accident because he had tried my number several times on the previous day. Although I know I could not have done much even if I could decipher the call, ignoring it is a regret I will have to live with.

T. SDHAKAR BHAH
Formerly, Additional Director
Central Government Health Service
Patna, P.O. Sullia
Karnataka

Obituary

Many doctors in India practise medicine in difficult areas under trying circumstances and resist the attraction of better prospects in western countries and elsewhere. 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