A MEMOIR

In 1997, I returned to Mumbai’s K.E.M. hospital after a year’s study leave for training in liver transplantation in England. In a few days, I got a call from Dr H.G. Desai enquiring whether I would be interested in joining Jaslok Hospital to help start liver transplantation. Hesitant about jumping into the intimidating world of private medicine, I gave a non-committal answer. Over the next several months, Dr Desai would spot me at meetings, come over, hold my elbow (a habit with him) and sternly ask: ‘What have you decided?’ This went on for almost a year. Finally, one day he called me to say that he had organized a meeting with Dada Mathradass, the patriarch of the family who owned the hospital. As I entered the room, Dr Desai asked: ‘Dada wants to know why you are not joining?’ I answered that I was not sure whether given its complexities, failures and costs, liver transplantation was sustainable in India. Dada replied: ‘It is Dr Desai’s dream and we want to see it happen. We will support you in whatever way you need.’ I asked, ‘If there is a deserving patient will you agree to do a transplant free?’ ‘Yes’, he answered and my decision was made.

I remember Dr Desai hovering around in the operation theatre when we performed what was perhaps India’s first successful live donor liver transplant in 1998 with a team from King’s College Hospital, London. Dr Desai stood by us in those early days whenever we needed him whether it was to talk to a patient’s family or to convince the trustees to subsidize the transplant activity. The first 10 liver transplants at Jaslok were done at less than ₹500,000 each.

From 1999 till a few months back when he stopped working because of his illness, I became Dr Desai’s colleague at Jaslok Hospital. There were some unique features to his personality, which all those who knew him will identify with. He was a man of few words, at times to the point of being curt. A stickler for time, he would be the first to arrive for the early morning radiology meetings and insist on starting the meeting even in the presence of one or two individuals. In his clinic he was known to signal an end to the consult with a patient by getting up from his chair and opening the door. Generally, he never made light talk.

A remarkable feature of Dr Desai’s career, which set him apart from the average practitioner of gastroenterology in India, was his rigorous academic work. Dr Desai started practice in an era when Indian gastroenterology had not been consumed by the glamorous and lucrative world of endoscopy. This may have perhaps permitted him more time and space to address common gastrointestinal problems and investigate them. Dr Desai and colleagues did a series of experiments on gastric physiology and gastric acid secretion in the 1970s and 1980s at the Topiwala National Medical College and Nair Hospital where he had joined Dr F.P. Antia’s department. Led by Dr Desai, the department went on to publish a series of papers in renowned international and national journals. Dr Desai soon established the first DM programme in Gastroenterology in western India in 1986. This programme has and continues to train a large number of well-known gastroenterologists. Later, his interests shifted to hepatology. Again, he performed elegant experiments (this time mainly at Jaslok) centring on the vaccine and later hepatitis C. His obsession with setting up a liver transplant programme was perhaps a logical culmination of his interest in hepatology.

In 2008, he wrote a book Gastritis: Indian perspective. In 2013, all his published research papers were compiled into a book titled Dr HG Desai: The clinician, teacher, researcher (A review of the book was published in Natl Med J India 2014;27:50). As one would expect, Dr Desai received a large number of awards in recognition of this work. Notable among these is the Shukuntala Amrichand award of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) in 1973, which is awarded for original research published by a doctor below the age of 40. Mumbai’s world of private medicine, which Dr Desai inhabited, is neither conducive to nor well known for quality academic work. Late Professor S.R. Naik who spent a part of his illustrious career in Mumbai’s K.E.M. hospital describes in his autobiography Metamorphosis how he was unable to retain young people in his department as they would leave in pursuit of the lucre of private practice in this mercantile city. Dr Desai’s academic work was therefore even more remarkable. Incidentally, Dr Desai was felicitated by the Government of India for being one of the highest income-tax payers.

Dr Desai had views about disease management which were not always in keeping with accepted guidelines. He was not worried to articulate them and practise them. Many years back he asked me to see a patient with acute pain in the right iliac fossa. I diagnosed acute appendicitis, a CT scan confirmed classical findings and I suggested surgery. Dr Desai however differed and said: ‘Acute appendicitis can be managed conservatively with antibiotics. I have treated many patients in this fashion.’ Surprised by his stand, I expressed my reservations to the family. The patient was not operated and settled with conservative management. Around 3 years back, I edited a book on appendicular diseases and gave a copy to Dr Desai. He read through it and commented: ‘But you have not mentioned about non-operative treatment of appendicitis with antibiotics.’ Once again, I was intrigued by his strong views. However, later substantial evidence in the literature confirmed that uncomplicated appendicitis could be treated with antibiotics and that only a small fraction of these patients would need surgery. While the contribution of Dr Desai to Gastroenterology is well known, a less known facet of his life was his interest in social and public affairs. He was a Gandhian and for many years travelled to Tara, a hamlet near Mumbai where a rural medical project is run by Gandhian socialists. In 2002 in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots, I remember attending a meeting for communal harmony in Mumbai where I was surprised to see Dr Desai there on stage publicly condemning the events after Godhra. The last time I met him was around a month before his death at a meeting organized by a senior colleague to discuss the issue of corruption in the medical fraternity. He was visibly frail but as we walked down to his car he held my elbow and said: ‘You know, I don’t have much time left. But let me know if I can still do something.’

H.G. Desai
(13 October 1933–25 August 2014)
REFERENCES

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Dr SUNIL K. PANDYA adds:

It was my good fortune to get to know the human side of Dr Hiralal Desai after I joined the Jaslok Hospital where he was Director of Gastroenterology.

My first experience was when I appeared before the Selection Committee. When the chairperson asked Dr Desai to put questions to me, he uttered simply, as described by Dr Nagral above: ‘I do not need to ask him any questions. I know of his work at K.E.M. Hospital and read the journal he edits.’ (The journal was then titled Medical Ethics and is now Indian Journal of Medical Ethics.)

His championship of ethics in general and of medicine in particular was vocal and strong. He wrote several essays in Gujarati newspapers on various aspects of medical ethics, voicing strong disapproval of those straying from principles he held dear. His own practice was unimpeachable and there is much all of us can learn from it.

His reading was principally restricted to works on philosophy, history and his favourite role models—Mahatma Gandhi and those who worked with him. He owned several publications brought out by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and the Navjivan Trust. I recall with gratitude his visits to my bedside in 2011 when I was laid low by a fractured spine. On each occasion he brought along with him a few books. He particularly recommended to me the diary of Mahadev Desai, translated into English. On another occasion, he told me of a letter Gandhiji had written to his father-in-law. When we met next, he presented me a photocopy of that letter for my records.

During his final weeks, his already slim figure had thinned out considerably and chemotherapy for his malignant disease had rendered sallow his hitherto pink face. His enthusiasm remained undiminished till his end.

We are fortunate in having his research papers collected together while he was in good health. Students of gastroenterology will treasure this heritage.

Obituaries

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