Obituaries

N. Rajan
(14 December 1930–26 May 2015)

Professor N. Rajan, a doyen among surgical gastroenterologists in India, passed away at Thiruvananthapuram (previously Trivandrum) on the afternoon of 26 May 2015 following a brief illness.

Dr Rajan was born at Varkala in Kerala, a place made holy by its association with the great saint and social reformer of Kerala, Sree Narayana Guru. Dr Rajan’s father, Dr P.N. Narayanan, was a well-known doctor in Varkala.

After passing his MBBS from Madras Medical College in 1953, Dr Rajan started his medical career in 1954 as an assistant surgeon in the Department of Paediatric Surgery at Sree Avittam Thirunal Hospital (SAT Hospital) in Trivandrum, Government of Kerala. Subsequently, after serving short stints in the departments of obstetrics and gynaecology, and anatomy, he left for England in 1957 to specialize in surgery. Dr Rajan worked as a senior house officer (SHO) in Queen Victoria Hospital and later in the Royal Infirmary in Lancashire. He also did a year of Senior Housemanship in Accident and Emergency at Hackney Hospital, London. Dr Rajan obtained his FRCS (Edinburgh) in 1961.

On his return to India, Dr Rajan joined the Kerala Government Medical College Service as a Tutor in General Surgery and rose to become Associate Professor and Unit Chief of Surgery in Calicut and later Trivandrum Medical College, a post which he occupied till 1974.

In 1974, Dr Rajan visited England again for a year, this time as a Fellow under the Colombo Plan. Even though this period was spent mainly in training in gastrointestinal (GI) endoscopy under stalwarts such as Paul Salmon, Dr Rajan had the unique opportunity to work closely with one of the best medical gastroenterology teams in UK at the time, at Royal Infirmary, Bristol, under the legendary Professor Alan Reid. This exposed him to the wider field of clinical gastroenterology and GI research. During the fellowship, he attended a month-long Advanced Course in Gastroenterology conducted by the British Postgraduate Medical Federation. It so happened that I too was an attendee at this course as it coincided with my WHO Fellowship at Edinburgh. This gave the two of us a chance to meet and interact freely and to frequently discuss and share our common vision and plans for our closely knit departments of Surgical and Medical Gastroenterology at Trivandrum Medical College.

After his return from England, Dr Rajan established the Department of Surgical Gastroenterology at the Medical College Hospital, Trivandrum in July 1975. This was the first department in the country devoted exclusively to GI surgery. This department had close links with the Department of Medical Gastroenterology that I had started in December 1972. We had common clinical programmes, teaching schedules and research protocols. Together, we set up a model for integrated development of the surgical and medical gastroenterology teams.

Dr Rajan was a very competent and meticulous surgeon. He was one of the pioneers in pancreatic surgery and surgery for portal hypertension in India. He used to do Whipple’s resection for cancer pancreas and shunt surgeries for extrahepatic portal vein obstruction (EHPVO) as early as the mid-1970s. Many of his shunt patients, I am told, are still alive, free of bleeding and come for follow-up to the Department of Surgical Gastroenterology, Medical College, Trivandrum. One of his earliest Whipple’s patients (for non-functioning endocrine tumour) done in 1978, survived 25 years. Over the years, Dr Rajan established one of the major surgical gastroenterology centres in India at the Medical College Hospital, Trivandrum. He presented his work at national and international meetings and published in reputed journals. His assistants and students admired his dexterity and surgical skills. He trained a large number of young surgeons in GI surgery and was an inspiration to them. His juniors and students loved him.

Due to personal reasons, Dr Rajan had to leave his favourite department at the Medical College, Trivandrum to take up the reins of the Department of General Surgery at Kasturba Medical College, Manipal in 1983. However, he left a legacy behind.

In 1991, he relinquished his job at Manipal and returned to Kerala and worked as a Consultant GI Surgeon at Sree Uthradom Thirunal (SUT) Hospital, Trivandrum. Even at this stage, Dr Rajan used to undertake major surgeries. He finally retired from surgical work in 2008.

I knew Dr Rajan since 1961. He was always soft spoken and exquisitely mannered—a true gentleman who rarely lost his temper. Dr Rajan was extremely kind and empathetic to his patients. In his room in the Medical College Hospital, Trivandrum was prominently displayed a framed message for all: ‘There is only one VIP here and that is the patient.’ That sums up his attitude towards patients.

Total sincerity was the hallmark of this great surgeon. He was a true and dependable friend. Dr Rajan has a loving family. His wife Dr Rajamma is a reputed ENT surgeon who headed the department at Medical College Hospital, Trivandrum. They have three sons–Ranjith, an ENT surgeon; Rajiv, a psychiatrist; and Ramesh, Professor and Head, Department of Surgical Gastroenterology at the Medical College, Trivandrum that Dr Rajan gave birth to—all happily married. Indian Gastroenterology has lost one of its stalwarts and I have lost a good friend.

Dr Rajan will be remembered by a large number of his admirers and friends as one of the father figures of Surgical Gastroenterology in India, a true gentleman and a great human being.

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