

Obituary

Shyamal Kumar Das

(3 January 1954–6 August 2018)



Professor Shyamal Kumar Das hailed from a very modest socioeconomic background. Born in rural Dhaniakhali in the Hooghly district of West Bengal, he was the fifth child among 7 children of parents who were weavers by profession. His father passed away from a stroke at the young age of 41 years when Shyamal was just 6 years of age. He was raised single-handedly by his mother. He cleared

school, high school and pre-medical examinations with a brilliant academic record, which made him a role model for his village school. He joined the MBBS course at Medical College, Kolkata, the oldest medical college in India. He bagged the last seat in medical college in his entrance year but stood 2nd in the final MBBS examination of the University of Calcutta in 1978. His humble rural background led to discrimination in medical college in the early years, but these were soon cast aside when teachers and fellow students came to realize his determination and hard-working nature. In college, he won the coveted Pardey Lukis Memorial Scholarship for the best student in clinical medicine.

His interest in neurology developed during the final MBBS days, and he completed his MD in General Medicine and DM in Neurology from the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, in 1983 and 1985, respectively. He spent 1 year (1996–97) at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, acquiring a Fellowship in Movement Disorders. This last academic stint was brief but one that he cherished lifelong and led him to maintain close academic contact with the Department of Clinical Neurosciences at the University of Calgary. He was later conferred the title of ‘Honorary Calgarian’ by the mayor of the city of Calgary, Canada.

Soon after he joined the government service as a medical officer in a district hospital, Professor Das started his independent research career. In 1992, he got selected as Clinical Tutor for the Department of Neuromedicine, Bangur Institute of Neurology (BIN; later renamed Bangur Institute of Neurosciences), a posting that helped him to transform into a full-fledged teacher, mentor and researcher. He retained his lifelong association with this institute, save for brief stints elsewhere, and contributed in large measure to its eminence. He started a Movement Disorders Clinic and Botulinum Toxin Clinic at this institute and a Neurogenetics Unit with laboratory, the first such unit in the public sector in the entire eastern India. He was also instrumental in reorganizing the DM Neurology training in this institute and pioneered the DM Neurology course in Burdwan Medical College. He served as the research guide of at least 30 DM Neurology residents and 3 PhD scholars.

As last counted by us, Professor Das’s research output is reflected in over 175 papers, including some 60 in international journals. Neuroepidemiology remained his focus of interest, and the surveys he organized with funding from the Indian Council of

Medical Research (between 2006 and 2012) remain the largest for neurological disorders in eastern India so far, and resulted in a series of seminal papers contributing Indian epidemiological data on all common neurological conditions including stroke (Das SK, Banerjee TK, Biswas A, Roy T, Raut DK, Mukherjee CS, *et al.* A prospective community-based study of stroke in Kolkata, India. *Stroke* 2007;**38**:906–10); mild cognitive impairment, dementia, Parkinson disease (Das SK, Misra AK, Ray BK, Hazra A, Ghosal MK, Chaudhuri A, *et al.* Epidemiology of Parkinson disease in the city of Kolkata, India: A community-based study. *Neurology* 2010;**75**:1362–9); essential tremor, dystonias, epilepsy (Banerjee TK, Ray BK, Das SK, Hazra A, Ghosal MK, Chaudhuri A, *et al.* A longitudinal study of epilepsy in Kolkata, India. *Epilepsia* 2010;**51**:2384–91); and headache. His neurogenetic studies, with basic science collaborators, spanned spinocerebellar ataxia, Parkinson disease (Biswas A, Sadhukhan T, Bose K, Ghosh P, Giri AK, Das SK, *et al.* Role of glutathione S-transferase T1, M1 and P1 polymorphisms in Indian Parkinson’s disease patients. *Parkinsonism Relat Disord* 2012;**18**:664–5); Wilson disease and dystonias. This prolific research output earned him the respect of the neurological fraternity nationally and globally and helped him to nurture younger researchers, including these humble authors. He could be a hard taskmaster to his students, research scholars and collaborators, demanding and authoritarian; but these, as he always said during relaxed tea sessions afterwards, were necessary to bring out the best in his co-workers. One of us (AH), though belonging to a different discipline, matured as a biostatistician managing the voluminous data that Professor Das’s surveys generated under his ever-watchful eyes. This debt can never be repaid. Strangely, he kept this façade of researcher aloof from his patients who mostly knew him as the kind doctor who was ever willing to do more for them, including forfeiting all his professional fees, if that could be of help. As an extension of his service work, he was instrumental in spearheading the activities of the Movement Disorders Society of India as its President (2016–17) and Kolkata chapter of the Alzheimer’s and Related Disorders Society of India.

Outside his professional and academic life, Professor Das was an avid cinema fan. Thriller and detective movies were his favourite genres, and as a young medical student, his colleagues knew him to watch a film before appearing for every examination throughout MBBS. Even as a child growing up in his village Dhaniakhali, his mother often noticed that a small sum was missing from the money she gave him to buy household necessities and she rightly assumed (as told to her grandchildren many years later) that this was to save money for the local ‘bioscope’ shows. He was also well-read on current affairs and took a keen interest in social and political issues, getting disturbed when the turn of events was not to his liking. He was a firm believer that the state should be the major provider of health services and, at every opportunity, championed the public health system and appropriately administered public health services. He believed that a thorough understanding of society and its people were fundamental to providing ethical medical care of the highest quality. Throughout his life, he had served in the government health sector and as his retirement drew near he often worried whether he should or should not join private hospitals as some of his colleagues had done. Fate spared him this moral dilemma.

He survived a myocardial infarction a few years ago but 2 haemorrhagic strokes, back-to-back, put to final rest the pillar of the 'BIN stroke team' that has contributed so much to stroke epidemiology in India. He passed away in the very institute that he had nurtured, surrounded by family and close colleagues who have been left wondering at life's ironies. His wife, a son and a daughter survive him. The daughter is a social scientist and specializes in the study of public health ethics and policy in India. The son is an engineer and trained in bioinformatics with a specialization in statistical genetics. Both are presently working abroad. We, along with countless students and co-workers, bid adieu to him, but 'Shyamal Sir' will continue to live in our hearts,

mentoring us from wherever good souls are destined to go. We pray that we are able to contribute up to his expectations.

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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 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