

irrespective of the time of the day, that he served himself!! He also had a great sense of humor and ready wit and was well known for his sharp and witty one liners. He endeared himself to his patients, many of whom remained in touch with him lifelong, well after they had been cured of their problems. During the course of his career, he had touched over 50 000 hearts directly or indirectly. His patients will remain forever indebted to him for having granted them a second lease of life.

Dr Venugopal married late. In his own words cardiac surgery and patient care consumed so much of his daily life that he had no time to think of marriage and setting up a family of his own. Eventually he was to meet his life partner—Priya Sarkar, a journalist by profession and the two were married by the divine grace of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Their daughter Sainsha is a bright and charming young lady who like her mother has also taken up journalism. Together with his wife, he published his autobiography—‘Heartfelt – A cardiac surgeon’s pioneering journey’ in 2023. The book is most inspiring and a must read for any young surgeon aspiring to take up cardiac surgery as a career.

The first half of Dr Venugopal’s life was devoted to developing cardiac surgery in the country and the creation of the Cardiothoracic Centre as the country’s premier training

center. He spent the latter few years of his career expanding his alma mater—the AIIMS and fighting tooth and nail against efforts to dilute its autonomy. His name will be prominent amongst those who are credited with making this Institution the showpiece medical institution of the country.

As the late Ratan Tata advised a batch of college students—‘Do not measure your success by your bank balance, cars, properties or social media followers. Measure your success by the number of lives you have enriched during your lifetime.’ By that yardstick Professor Venugopal’s success was immeasurable, considering the number of lives he enriched—his family, his patients, his students, his colleagues, the nurses and staff of AIIMS and many other who were fortunate to have made his acquaintance.

His memory will remain eternal in the minds of his students, colleagues and patients. May his soul rest in peace. Om Shanti.

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A LEADER WHO MODELED CONVICTION, COMMITMENT AND COURAGE

Professor Panangipalli Venugopal (P. Venugopal as Telugu speakers initial their family names and Venu as friends would fondly call) was a remarkable leader whose legacy is a rich mix of many accomplishments. His distinguished life reflected many shining facets—excellence as a skilful cardiac surgeon who mended many maladies of the heart, a stern but diligently mentoring teacher, an able administrator who led an institution of excellence to greater glory and a devotee of Shri Sathya Sai Baba who streamed his reverence into the creation of a state of the art hospital at Puttaparthi to serve the poor and needy. Beyond all of those attributes for which he became nationally and globally reputed was the courage he displayed when his beloved institution, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS, New Delhi), was subjected to a serious assault on its autonomy by a spiteful political leadership that transiently oversaw political governance of that premier institute.

Scholarly brilliance lit up all of his academic career, from a stellar undergraduate studentship at AIIMS to fellowships in leading global centres of cardiac surgery at Buffalo and Houston. Training with giants in the field such as N. Gopinath, Subramaniam and Denton Cooley expanded his skill set. He remained a lifelong learner and teacher, gaining and gifting expertise in surgical correction of valvular, congenital and coronary disease.

At a time when cardiac surgery was still establishing itself as a major specialty in India, AIIMS was the lone centre of excellence north of the Vindhyas. Patients came from many parts of India, other South Asian countries and even from Mauritius. Professor Venugopal grew his talents there and helped the department of cardiac surgery become a magnet for

cardiac patients from near and far while acting as an incubator for skilled trainees in cardiac surgery to spread out to other parts of India.

Though he never sought publicity, his surgical skills came into limelight when he won national acclaim after performing the first successful cardiac transplant in India. The Indian parliament paid tribute to him, in a rarely bestowed honour. The cardiac transplantation programme established by him at AIIMS continues to this day, extending the quantity and enhancing the quality of life years for many who were in terminal stages of heart failure.

I first came into contact with him in 1974, when I began my postgraduate training in medicine with a posting in the cardiology department of AIIMS. In those days, the departments of cardiology and cardiac surgery were just across the corridor on the seventh floor of the main hospital building. Later on, the departments moved to different floors in the cardiothoracic centre which came up in a new building. All through, however, the two departments functioned in close concert to ensure that patients were provided high quality and timely surgical or medical care as required.

So, Professor Venugopal was a constant part of my professional life at AIIMS, as I trained in MD (Medicine), DM (Cardiology) and then journeyed through a highly fulfilling career as a faculty member in the department of cardiology, beginning as a lecturer and retiring as head of the department. I found him to be intensely committed to round the clock patient care, working without rest or respite. He demanded the same commitment from other colleagues. His was not merely a skill of surgical proficiency. He was well versed in the intricate elements of cardiology too. Few of his peers in cardiac surgery could have matched his knowledge of haemodynamics or cardiac embryology.

Doing clinical rounds with him was daunting but also a richly rewarding experience. He was an excellent teacher. He trained and mentored generations of highly skilled cardiac surgeons who are now leading departments in Indian and international medical institutions. His confidence in his trainees was such that he opted to get his own coronary bypass surgery performed by one of his students at AIIMS. The stream of tributes which continue to flow from his students represent profound gratitude and undimmed emotional attachment.

As a doctor, he was an inspirational role model displaying complete commitment to competent and constant care. From the outpatient department, to the surgical ward and from the operation theatre to the postoperative intensive care in the open heart room, he was a role model of fully committed care that worked ceaselessly to provide the best outcome for the patient. No wonder many of his patients still mourn his passing like that of a close family member.

He was a tough task master who never permitted lapses which represented lack of attention or commitment to assigned tasks and was uncompromising in his demand for consistently high professional standards. Sometimes, he could be brusque and petrify people with his bursts of temper. Though his tongue and temper were sharper than his scalpel on those occasions, he quickly and skilfully sutured those relationships without leaving any resentful scars. Everyone knew he was guided not by a personal ego but by unwavering commitment to patient welfare.

He was also keen on fostering innovative research. He was among the first in the world to initiate studies in the use of stem cell therapy for restoring functioning heart muscle to hearts damaged by heart attacks. He encouraged cardiologists and cardiac surgeons to work collaboratively on potentially path breaking research projects and enabled inter-disciplinary and inter-departmental collaborations.

When the star student of AIIMS became its Director, he infused energy in to the faculty to elevate standards in teaching, research and patient care to higher levels. He monitored performance and demanded accountability, while providing unstinted support to initiatives and enterprise which expanded the institution's technical armoury and enhanced its performance. He mellowed in his leadership style, without ever losing his focus on attaining higher standards of all round excellence. As a super achiever himself, he inspired the faculty to aspire and achieve more than their own expectations of themselves.

Even as he devoted himself to good governance of AIIMS, he got caught in the political turbulence of an anti-reservation agitation which saw protests in the AIIMS campus. He was caught in the crossfire of political battles and attracted the ire of the then union health minister. Professor Venugopal was unceremoniously stripped of his post by a compliant Institute Body. Lesser men would have surrendered. Professor Venugopal fought and won a legal battle. He regained his position as Director and retired at the end of his full term. He defended the dignity of his post and the autonomy of the institution, with a courage that made him a hero to the faculty and students of AIIMS. Perhaps that was the best way he could repay his debt to an institution which nurtured his glorious career.

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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