

Obituary

Sunil K. Pandya

(11 February 1940–17 December 2024)



On 17 December 2024, India lost one of its early pioneers of neurosurgery, a unique multifaceted personality, deeply committed not just to professional medicine, teaching and research, but to the usually neglected broad field addressing medico-social and bioethics issues. A highly cultured, principled, gentle and friendly soul, Professor Sunil Pandya was a personal friend, whose passing

away has been a deep personal loss. I am thankful to the *National Medical Journal of India*, which he served for over 35 years as a member of the Editorial Board, to provide me this opportunity to pay my homage to him. I consider it a great blessing to have known him and closely worked with him in several areas of common interest.

Born on 11 February 1940 to Shri Krishna Lal and Mrs Bhadraben Pandya, at Santacruz West (a suburb of Mumbai), Sunil had his schooling at a neighbourhood school. He has been described as a bright, diligent, hard-working pupil, who excelled throughout. A voracious reader from a young age whose varied literary interests extended from Albert Schweitzer, George Washington Carver to P.G. Wodehouse, and expanded over the years to include the Old and New Testament, the works of Shakespeare and Emerson, and Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* among others. He passed the high school examination at the age of 14 years and Inter-Science at 16 years. This delayed his entry to a medical college, the minimum age for admission being 17 years, when he was admitted to the Grant Medical College and not to his preferred Seth GS Medical College (a proverbial 'Closed Door'). But, in his own words, 'This was a stroke of great good luck for future (the 'Open Window'). It was here that I met Shubha. Later to grant me the privilege of being her husband'. She supported his voracious appetite for reading from a wide spectrum of books, classics, fiction, non-fiction, biographies and humour, throughout his life.

Sunil passed the MBBS (1961) and MS (Surgery) examinations in 1965. It appears that he had decided to specialize in Neurosurgery even before entering the medical college for reasons not provided in his writings. This decision was further strengthened when after his MS degree he worked with Professor Gajendra Sinh at the JJ Hospital. In 1967, he joined Professor Homi Dastur at the KEM Hospital and Seth GS Medical College as an Assistant Surgeon, where he rose to the position of Professor in 1975. According to Sunil, he chose this path 'owing to his disinclination for private practice'. And 'The full time teaching position suited me admirably and in Dr. Dastur I had a mentor par excellence'. Superannuating in 1998, he joined the Jaslok Hospital.

My personal interactions with Sunil

In the 1960s, when I joined the neuroscience fraternity in India, there were only a few of us. We soon became part of a happy

family irrespective of where we worked. My first contact was by chance with those from Bombay (now Mumbai) where I had landed in 1961 on return from my training abroad. There I met Drs Ginde, Daftry, Gajendra Sinh, Anil Desai, Naushir Wadia and Darab Dastur, who warmly welcomed me to their fold. Sunil was still an Intern, and I met him through a friend from my time at the Montreal Neurological Institute, Dr Vijay Dave, who had joined as an Honorary Consultant in the JJ Group of Hospitals. Though much younger to me I was impressed by this bright, young, highly motivated and friendly persona and over the years developed an increasing friendship because of a similarity in our value system, including our preference to work in a full time teaching job and not in private practice, involvement in the broader field of neurosciences not just neurosurgery, and working as a dedicated member of a team and not for personal glory, to name a few. We soon found our common interest in history of medicine and later still medical bioethics.

I will give just three examples which brought us closer together.

In 1989 India was to host three World Congresses (Neurosurgery, Neurology and Epilepsy), with the Neurology Society of India, the solitary society in India involved in these specialties, serving as the host organization. For some time before this we were aware of Sunil's interest in History of Medicine, and Dr B Ramamurthi and I decided to persuade Sunil to take up the responsibility to produce a comprehensive history of Indian Neurosciences, which was titled *Neurosciences in India: Retrospect and Prospect*. What he produced was, what I have often called, 'A Bible of Indian Neurosciences' which remains a landmark publication; a 743 page volume with 40 authors and 44 chapters.

In my contribution to this publication, I wrote: 'Looking at the last four decades of development of neurosciences in India, it is obvious that despite tremendous odds commendable progress has been made'. 'These contributions have been documented in this volume through the combined efforts of a number of people, but most notably – Dr Sunil Pandya, who must be singled out for special tributes. In his unassuming and self-effacing manner he has persevered, and persuaded the authors of various sections to provide manuscripts, got these refereed, and painstakingly edited these to provide this monumental work'.

This monumental work characterized Sunil's most important qualities. I take this opportunity to plead with the Neurological Society of India to get it reprinted (and if possible updated). This would be the most befitting tribute to Sunil and a precious gift to the younger generation.

In 'revenge' Sunil made me do something which I had avoided doing, write my autobiography 'Closed door, open windows'. The associated efforts by Sunil to overcome my resistance are summarized in the Preface of the book for which Deepak Gupta and Sunil Pandya agreed to be co-editors.

Another area of our mutual collaboration, based on our common interest, was in the field of history of medicine. In 2016, we realized that our neuroscience community was generally oblivious of the contributions of our pioneers. Sunil and I, in consultation with the then Editor of *Neurology India*, Professor

Sanjay Behari, decided to address this lacuna. Thus, over the next 8 years we contributed to more than a dozen *Biographies of pioneer Indian neuroscientists*. This prompted other colleagues to contribute biographical memoirs of others pioneers known to them. This also enhanced their knowledge about the history of establishment, trials and tribulations and contributions of various neuroscience (both clinical and basic) departments, centres and institutions.

Third, are the contributions of Sunil Pandya to the body of knowledge outside the sphere of neurosciences. The contributions of Sunil Pandya as a neurosurgeon and biomedical scientist are generally well known to the neuroscience community. Since, most of these are published in professional specialty journals mostly prior to his superannuation from KEM, and are available on the internet, I have not provided those details here. The following account deals with his contributions to the uncommon fields of medico-social-ethical issues and history of medicine. I strongly believe that they deserve to be brought to the attention of the medical community, with the hope that this information may encourage others to contribute to these relatively neglected fields and promote their growth. I have attempted to classify these overlapping fields in four heads: (i) history of medicine, (ii) biomedical ethics, (iii) medical education, and (iv) matters of societal concern.

These contributions, numbering more than 150 which were published in journals like the *National Medical Journal of India* (NMJI), *J Medical Biography*, *Indian J Med Ethics*, *J Postgrad Med*, *Mens Sana Monogr*, etc. seldom draw the attention of biomedical professionals or health administrators and policy makers. It is then no surprise that the last such contribution, a review on a book by his younger colleague at Jaslok Hospital, '*My Birds Songs and Neurology*', published in the November–December 2024 issue of *Neurology India* arrived when I was sitting down to write this tribute to my dear friend.

Professor Pandya was obviously one of the pillars of strength for the NMJI, serving on its Editorial Board since the sixth issue of the journal in 1988. Besides contributing a regular feature *Letter from Bombay* (later *Letter from Mumbai*), he frequently wrote on diverse topics of societal interest such as Medical Colleges in India, Ethics and Public Health Policies, Brain Death, Academic Staff in our teaching hospitals, and why our food and drug administrations are in such a poor shape, to name a few.

Being associated with medical education for several years, he was not hesitant to voice his concerns on our short comings as reflected by some of the following publications: *Medical Education: Are we on the right track?*; *The willful progressive devaluation of public school teaching hospitals*; *State policies on admission to medical colleges*; *Medical Council of India: Need for total overhaul*; *Functioning of MCI analysed by the Parliamentary Committee*; *The National Board of Examination and the Universities*; *Deemed Universities*.

As mentioned earlier, Sunil got interested in this subject early in life, reading about the biographies or writings of some well-known medical men around the world such as Albert Schweitzer, John Hilton, William Osler and Harvey Cushing. This interest inspired him to write on subjects like *Classic description of neurological disorders by Charles Morehead (Neurology in Bombay in 1840s)*; *Medicine in Goa - a former Portugese territory*; and *One hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Grant Medical College and JJ Hospital*.

Biomedical ethics became a subject of increasing interest, predominantly in the last three decades of his life. He started a

group of like-minded persons in Mumbai to study, debate and promote this subject. He helped to establish the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, and later was designated its Emeritus Editor. Some of the examples of his personal contributions on the subject include *Medical Ethics in India – then and now*, *Bioethics in Asia*, *Ethical issues in neurosurgery - a cross cultural view*; *Informed consent for brain surgery*, *Ethical aspects of clinical trials in gene therapy* and *Brain death and our transplant law*.

While a great deal could be written about the diverse qualities of Sunil, I have restricted this piece to some of his lesser known contributions with which I have been personally acquainted. I hope these contributions will prove to be a source of inspiration for the younger generation.

I take this opportunity to pay my personal tributes to him and join the family in their prayers for peace to the departed soul.

P.N. TANDON

Department of Neurosurgery
All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi
nikhil2811tandon@gmail.com

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SUNIL PANDYA: A RENAISSANCE MAN

On 9 November 2024, I had emailed Sunil Pandya, "I suddenly remembered when I first heard of you! Roop Gursahani ... had started a project on evoked potentials, etc. ... with a Dr Shuba Pandya at Bombay Hospital. I remember his telling me 'She and her husband are so well read in all fields and are so intelligent! They are a Renaissance couple'. I saw you first, of course, only in 1993 at Grant Medical College (GMC) at your lecture on the pathology of the spinal cord."

His response was characteristic of the man: 'Thank you for this very interesting information. It was kind of Roop. I recall the talk on the spinal cord and how you made kind comments on it. I continue to treasure those comments.'

Again, as was typical, this response was sent 7 minutes after my mail to him.

I have been privileged to have had the finest teachers all my life, and I have heard some scintillating talks. The talk by Dr Pandya at the GMC in 1993 remains among the 10 best lectures that I have ever heard. What a pity that it has not been recorded for posterity!

Between 1993 and 1996, I used to send Dr Pandya photocopies of all the articles on medical ethics that I thought would interest him. I was aware that he and colleagues had started a newsletter which had soon metamorphosed into a journal about medical ethics. I was a subscriber because I believed (and still believe) that such efforts must be encouraged materially, beyond mere lip service.

In 1996, he invited me to join the editorial team of the *Issues in Medical Ethics* (now renamed *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* [IJME]). At the first editorial meeting that I attended, he asked me to call him by name, rather than the formal 'Dr Pandya'. Our editorial board meetings were held in his departmental office in KEM hospital and so, we met often after that. Even after