

Obituary

Chandrakant Gokuldas Saraiya

(22 October 1916–14 March 2017)



Dr Saraiya was born on 22 October 1916 in Ahmedabad. His parents moved to Bombay (now Mumbai) 2 years later. While his father was a lawyer, his brothers opted for trading in cotton. His elder brother, Mr Ramanlal G. Saraiya, was an éminence grise in industry and banking.

Chandrakant Saraiya joined Grant Medical College and obtained the M.B. and B.S. qualification in 1938. He was the recipient of several awards including

the Dr John McLennan medal (proficiency in the principles and practice of medicine), Nusserwanji Fakirji Surveyor Gold Medal (obtaining the highest number of marks in the final M.B. and B.S. examination), Lord Sandhurst medal and the Khan Bahadur Jamshedji Eduljee Rustamji medal (ophthalmology). He was a member of the college cricket team that played matches in Poona (now Pune) in August 1936.

After working at Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Hospital for 3 more years, he moved to Nowrosjee Wadia Maternity Hospital, where he worked with Drs V.N. Shirodkar, Y.N. Ajinkya and K.M. Masani. He obtained the MD and MS degrees of the University of Bombay. He was the only candidate to obtain the MS with distinction.

After the Second World War ended in 1945, he joined other doctors like Vernon Da Silva who awaited further training and qualification in Britain. Dr Shirish Sheth told us of the examiner at Dr Saraiya's FRCS examination who asked him whether he had seen a Colles' fracture in India. He got a classic response. 'People fall on their outstretched hands and as a consequence develop the dinner fork deformity at the wrist in India as much as they do in Britain.' In one sentence, he had put the examiner in his place by describing the essential features of this fracture as he answered the question put to him. A small wonder that Bhatt and Sheth (2008) called him 'an exceptional person with unlimited grey matter and a razor sharp tongue'.¹

Dr Saraiya was awarded the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1947. On his return, Lt. Col. Spackman, Dr Shirodkar, Dr Ajinkya and Dr B.D. Patwardhan were his colleagues on the staff at the J.J. Hospital.

He was appointed as Honorary Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at his *alma mater* as well as at Nowrosjee Wadia Maternity Hospital. He also served as Honorary Consultant at Sir Hurkisondas Nurrotumdas Hospital and at R.A. Podar Medical College in Bombay. Dr K.N. Udupa was a colleague there and went on to greater glories in Varanasi. Dr Saraiya was the president of the Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India in 1975–76 and 20th president of the Bombay Obstetrics and Gynaecology Society (now Mumbai Obstetrics and Gynecological Society) in 1973–74.

He remained a student throughout his life. At the age of 55 years he was seen attending an operation by Dr B.N. Purandare at Tata Memorial Hospital in order to improve his own technique of performing Wertheim's operation.

Vast practical experience coupled with his characteristic wit

and humour ensured that his lectures were always very well attended. While the obstetrics he taught us eludes my memory, I shall never forget some of his statements. When emphasizing a scientific fact, he would exhort us to bet our 'last but one shirt' on the issue. 'Never bet your last shirt. There is always a rare possibility of your being rendered shirtless.' As our university examinations approached, he attempted to allay our anxieties. 'All of you are sure to pass this examination...' After a pause, he would continue, '...sooner or later.' Dr Shirish Sheth reminded us that he would bestow fulsome praise on an individual and as the latter basked in it, add, 'don't take this seriously'. On one occasion in 1961, as a girl belatedly joined her colleagues at a clinic by him, he stopped whatever he was saying and smiled at her. He then addressed the rest of the group. 'Two important events have occurred today. Queen Elizabeth II has arrived in India and this young lady has favoured us with her presence.' He was a chain smoker. As he pulled out an imported cigarette, he would say, 'Gandhiji has asked us to boycott British goods. I go one further. I burn them.'

His command over English literature contributed to the charm of his teaching. An example is his manner of depicting the academic atmosphere then permeating the campus of J.J. Hospital using a slight modification of a verse from Gray's *Elegy written in a country churchyard*. He recited extempore to all of us in the lecture theatre:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the J.J. air.

Reminded of this at the age of 99 years, he smiled and recited this and several other verses joyously. As he ended his recital, he felt sorry for the average present-day medical student who has not the slightest acquaintance with literature—English, Indian or of any other kind.

It is a small wonder that each of his students felt that a personal bond existed with him. Dr Arun Moolgaokar, a bright star among Dr Saraiya's students, migrated to England in the early 1960s. One of his last letters before his death was to Dr Saraiya.

A group of his students invited him to be the chief guest at a dinner party hosted by them. At the end of the dinner, as they were about to part, they presented him a cigarette lighter along with the inscription: 'You are matchless!'

Dr Shirish Sheth calls him a teacher of teachers and truly, Dr Saraiya has endowed so many with the qualities that have made them respected teachers in their own rights.

Even at the height of his career, he would do rounds at Motlibai and Petit hospitals in the campus of J.J. Hospital and at Hurkisondas Hospital to check on complicated and high-risk patients. He slept in the hospital on innumerable nights when practising a wait-and-watch approach in patients with difficult labour. Not for him the easy recourse to caesarean section when there remained the possibility of avoiding an operation.

He practised the Hippocratic injunction *Primum non nocere* (first, do not harm). All those privileged to be his students will never forget his repeated emphasis on the dictum 'diagnosis must precede treatment'.

Dr Shirish Sheth also recalled a patient who had severe pain in

the abdomen in the days when sonography and hormone estimations were not even a distant dream. Since the patient's family was wealthy, a plethora of consultants were invited to examine and advise. The cardiologist confidently diagnosed myocardial ischaemia. The surgeon was equally confident that she had perforated a peptic ulcer. Dr Saraiya, as usual, took a detailed history, examined her gently but thoroughly and diagnosed an ectopic pregnancy. Abdominal exploration proved him right.

Drs Bhatt and Sheth recall that among his patients were the wife of the serving consulate for the USA in Bombay and Mrs Jaya Amitabh Bachchan.

His better half, Mrs Annie Saraiya, was born into a learned and respected lawyer's home and was, herself, renowned for her poetry and other literary output. She was appointed to several committees and to the Senate of the University of Bombay. Dr Saraiya had photographs of her leading the convocation procession along with the chancellor. Her admirers recall her charm, affection and graciousness as a hostess.

Her sudden demise as they prepared to attend a function one evening affected Dr Saraiya greatly and decades later he continued to miss her presence. On 2 April 1998, he inaugurated the upgraded labour ward at Nowrosjee Wadia Maternity Hospital. He had donated ₹1 500 000 for this purpose in memory of his beloved wife. Other significant donations without any fanfare have been to Shanti Avedna (Bandra), to the School for the Blind (Dadar), ophthalmic outdoor clinic at the SNTD college (Santacruz) and to the eye hospital in Gondal.

A stroke as he sat in the auditorium at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan deprived him of the use of his left limbs. Fortunately, Dr Shirish Sheth was by his side and immediately arranged for his admission to Breach Candy Hospital. Dr Sheth had, since, looked after every need of Dr Saraiya, calling from time to time when away from Mumbai to confirm that all was well with him. During a visit to Toronto, he instructed his secretary to call him if there was a crisis so that he could fly back immediately.

The ravages of time rendered Dr Saraiya sightless. He could not indulge in his much-enjoyed walks. To compensate for these, he obtained the services of a full-time secretary who read aloud to him from journals, books and newspapers. He listened to the television, especially to the national news broadcasts and when an interesting cricket match was being played somewhere in India. Visitors continuously expressed astonishment at how well aware he was of all current events in India and abroad and how effortlessly he rattled off the latest cricket scores.

None of these handicaps dimmed his sharp intellect and ready

repartee. He delighted in visitors, especially those he was fond of—and those were many.

At a lunch hosted by Dr Sushil Shah on 8 May 2016 to celebrate Dr Saraiya's oncoming 100th birth anniversary, Dr Saraiya spoke feelingly about the fact that ageing is not as graceful is made out to be. He talked about how painful it can be. 'I have severe handicaps. I am blind, paralysed on one side, unable to go for my walks, go out of my home as I wish, do what I would like to do. There are just two parts of my body that function well—my heart and my brain. The nights are the only time I am comfortable for I am fortunate in being to be able to sleep well. I feel a sense of relief as night comes on. But on awakening the next morning, the same feeling of dismay envelops me again. I listen to television as I can see nothing. I get some information from the newspaper as it is read out to me. I sit long hours with nothing to do. My visitors are a great source of solace but each one has his own life to lead. When my wife died, I told myself that it was only a matter of time before I too would pass away. But Yamaraja has forgotten all about me.' (Sheth Shirish S. Personal Communication; May 2016).

Others at the gathering talked of how he was always *au courant* with all the major events in the medical arena in Mumbai and the rest of India, the shenanigans in Parliament and legislative assemblies, performances at cricket matches and all major medical events reported in the newspapers and on television. Dr L.N. Vora spoke of how one of the first questions he faced when visiting Dr Saraiya was, 'So what is the latest news?' and when he did try and answer this, he learnt that Dr Saraiya already knew more details than he did. Someone suggested that Dr Saraiya's home was the place to be if you wanted to catch up with the latest gossip on doctors. 'Don't defame me,' replied Dr Saraiya.

Fracture of the spine rendered him bedridden. As his life ebbed to the close, he welcomed death as a release.

REFERENCES

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