

Obituary

Dhairyasheel Narayan Savant

(30 March 1962–24 November 2021)



Indian surgical oncology has lost one of its stalwarts with the untimely death of Dr Dhairyasheel Savant.

Born in 1962 to Mrunalini and Narayan Savant, he was the older of two siblings, and had a happy childhood growing up in Dadar, Mumbai. His father Dr Narayan Savant was Head of the Department of Anaesthesiology, Critical Care and Pain at the Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai. Dhairyasheel went on to

read Medicine at the Grant Medical College, Mumbai, qualifying in 1983. He applied himself as a student, and was clear from early on that he wanted a career in surgery. He did his postgraduation in surgery from the Tata Memorial Hospital, which inevitably led to a career in surgical oncology. He had a particular interest in head and neck oncology and reconstructive surgery. His training abroad included a Fellowship at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Medical Center, New York, USA in 1991 and a UICC-sponsored ICRET Fellowship in Michigan in 1994.

Dhairyasheel was a talented surgeon, and painstakingly built up his surgical practice and reputation. Most of us express our dominant behavioural traits in how we progress through our careers. His main strengths were his willingness to help patients and to collaborate with colleagues. Expertise in surgical oncology has traditionally been restricted to big cities. He appreciated this and worked to rectify it, collaborating closely with surgical colleagues in smaller towns in Maharashtra. Often, he would travel out to district towns and operate there, sometimes a daunting exercise in limited facilities. Gradually, as his reputation grew, he concentrated his practice in Mumbai at the Asian Cancer Institute, the Saifee Hospital and the Breach Candy Hospital.

His collegial traits were evident in the setting up of the Asian Institute of Oncology (now called the Asian Cancer Institute), in which he had a big role to play. It started off in 2002 as a team of consultants working to provide high-quality multispecialty cancer care in Mumbai. He helped grow the project and supported its move to the Cumballa Hill Hospital; at the time of his death, he was its Medical Director for over a year.

In the past decade, Dr Savant brought his organizational skills to bear on his field at the national level. His touch was evident when the four major professional associations—The Association of Radiation Oncologists of India (AROI), the Indian Society of Medical and Paediatric Oncology (ISMPO), the Indian Association of Surgical Oncology (IASO) and the Indian Society of Oncology (ISO) came together to hold the first Indian Cancer Congress (ICC) in Delhi in November 2013. It was a landmark event with over 4000 delegates. At that time, he was the Treasurer of the ISO. He later became the Secretary of the IASO. He was the Secretary General for the third ICC that was to be held in November 2021, but was postponed due to Covid to 2023.

It was my privilege to have Dhairyasheel as a friend from our first day as classmates in medical school. He took his attention to detail and his ‘can do’ attitude beyond the operating room to every aspect of surgical life, whether it was looking after a ward full of people with burns, as an intern in rural Dahanu, or a patient he had performed a laryngectomy on. His help was forthcoming to anyone who sought it, and no problem was too difficult to solve. He approached people with kindness, and everything that life had to offer with a huge sense of adventure and joy. He had a bright, inquisitive mind and was a consistent member of the college quiz team. He travelled widely and wherever he visited, he would seek out and look up old friends and classmates. He faced his last few months of illness with immense courage and positivity. He was an attentive husband, a loving father and a caring son. He is survived by his wife Tanuja and daughters Akshaya and Aishwarya.

His death at the peak of his career is a loss to the entire surgical oncology fraternity and to everyone who had the privilege of working with him. It is a huge loss to his patients, who have lost a caring surgeon. I have personally watched him take a phone call while in London, and explain smilingly to a patient in Mumbai that it was fine to have a mango drink (*aam pana*) after neck surgery! Friends will miss his encyclopaedic knowledge of whiskies and liqueurs, and his enthusiasm for dining out at seafood restaurants. They will also miss his generosity. While on a trip to Bali with seven friends he went and bought them all colourful *batik* shirts to remember the occasion (which they now wear when they raise a toast to him). I personally will always miss his ambiguous, smiling shake of the head, which could mean ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, and which used to drive me mad when I was on the quiz team with him!

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DHAIRYASHEEL, MY FRIEND

I distinctly remember when and where I first saw Dhairyasheel. It was July 1983 and I was studying in the library of Grant Medical College, Bombay (now Mumbai) for my first MBBS finals, when a slightly portly guy walked past. ‘That’s the brains of his class’, whispered a friend who was sitting next to me. Dhairyasheel was preparing for his final MBBS examinations and indeed, was ‘brains’.

We met each other soon after and became friends. You would, perhaps, expect me to write in this obituary, about what a wonderful surgeon and teacher Dhairyasheel was. As it turns out, I never saw him operating and he never formally taught me surgery. But I knew from his colleagues that he was an extremely competent surgeon.

I, however, got to know the fun side of him. He was responsible for inviting me to my first youth festival—where our college

ultimately won the trophy for best participation! He (and his friends, all of whom are leaders in their respective fields today) invited me to many picnics, plays and get-togethers, showing that the serious business of medical studies could also always accommodate playfulness. I distinctly recall him advising me to see the movie *Top Gun* on the screen and not on TV, to enjoy the special effects. I was unable to then—but shall make up for it by seeing *Top Gun: Maverick* on the screen soon.

Like me, he trained at the Tata Memorial Hospital. I recall his telling me about a doctor-patient of his from Bihar. Dhairyasheel was the resident in the Head and Neck unit when the patient came to the hospital for surgery for an oral cancer. A few months later, this patient turned up for plastic surgery related to the first operation and was pleasantly surprised to see Dhairyasheel in the plastic surgery unit (because of the surgical rota). When he landed up some time later in urology for a new complaint and again found Dhairyasheel there (because of the rota, of course!), he was convinced that he was being taken care of by the most important surgeon in the hospital, someone who was omnipresent!

My last message to Dhairyasheel was on his birthday in 2021. I had asked him ‘60 is the new 40? 59 is the new 39?’ as

I was not sure if it was his 59th or 60th birthday. ‘Yep. Mind over matter’, he had replied—leaving me to figure out what that meant!

Perhaps one of the few things I learned about surgery from Dhairyasheel was this: we were talking to each other on the staircase of Tata Memorial Hospital and (I forget how this came up now, after this 30-year period) he said: ‘If I have a sudden bleeder on the table, I have to act immediately. I can’t afford to wait and analyse things—the patient could die.’ My respect for surgeons increased dramatically after I realized that what he had just told me, was quite true. But I doubt that he would ever have had to agonize over such potential problems.

He was, after all, *Dhairyasheel*.

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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*