

Speaking for Ourselves

Where the mind of a doctor is born...

VIDYA VISWANATH, NANDINI VALLATH

The Department of Anatomy received a human body, donated for dissection. The body was of late Dr Padmini, a revered music teacher in Visakhapatnam, who willed this donation as her final wish. When the family handed over her body, it was accompanied with a letter from her music students to the medical students. It read as follows:

An Ode to a Teacher—who was... who is...
Feb-20-2019
Visakhapatnam

Dear Medical Students,

My beautiful teacher's body is in front of you—lying still—waiting to be explored. Now she is a 'mentor' to you silently teaching you all that you need—with each incision you make.

Not many people will be willing to donate themselves after death and let others experiment on them. So please respect her and handle her gently.

I hope who ever has a chance to learn from her—learn well—she was an extraordinary teacher! Not just a Veena teacher—a mentor—a philosopher—a counsellor—a healer—a wonderful mother (treated all her students as her own children—and everyone equal)—what can I say—'All in one'—in a tiny delicate body!! She was 'humane'. But for me—she was/is the universe. Only those who know my relationship with her can understand this.

While you work on her—observe every part of her body—her skin radiates beautiful golden colour. When you come across her veins, arteries and nerves—pluck gently—she may even teach you Carnatic music with those lovely strings of tissue.

The scars on her heart—each scar—represent a person who shared their troubles. There must be many. The deeper one may be mine. She was worried about me even in her last stages.

And those sparkling eyes—may be not sparkling as much now—because they will be too bright to handle while you work on her. So, she donated them for a better cause and to give someone a bright future.

Do I even need to say anything about her brain. How many tasks she handled when her soul instructed/ordered/demanded it !!?? The willpower to hold on to her last breath (way too long)—just to wait for our stage programme to be done. She knew if she is gone, we will be shattered and not perform.

Her hands and fingers—they only knew to express kindness through her touch. And what lovely music they played!! She never allowed us to bow down to touch her 'feet'. She hugged instead—letting us know that our place is in her heart—or she held our shoulders—pat our back—to let us know that we are equal.

But alas—I got to touch her feet—she could not stop me this time. That is my only 'Guru Dakshina' I could offer. She was above and beyond all the material things and never accepted anything from anyone.

We could write volumes about my teacher. But it is your turn to find out and learn from her and become good doctors. Wishing you the very best and success in life (heart symbol).

From all the students of Dr Padmini(– written by Yasodhara. With tears we bid her farewell.

She loves pin wheel (hand drawn picture of pin wheel).

The heart swells ... just reading it. Simple and poignant, it is a precious tribute to every one of those bodies which have been our first teachers in medicine.

Padmini was diagnosed with cancer in 2015 and did not let the malady interfere with her melody. Even after a relapse in 2016, and gradually transitioning into palliative care, she stayed deeply engaged with music and continued teaching her students up to a month before she died in February 2019, 2 years after her 60th birthday.

Quoting William Arthur Ward, 'A mediocre teacher tells, a good teacher explains, a superior teacher demonstrates, and a great teacher inspires...'

Dr Padmini was a great music teacher when alive, inspiring each student to be the most perfect of who she/he could be. She left behind a legacy in music and a priceless gift for medicine by donating her eyes to the needy and her body to the Anatomy Department of Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam, and she transcended beyond great, to a teacher beyond comparison.

Dr Padmini now lies on a table in the anatomy dissection hall. Would our MBBS students ever wonder about the person she was? Would they care? Would the demonstrators prime such discussions? These questions, although innocent and naïve, truly question the deeper precincts of our medical education.

We hear young MBBS students discuss on how easy it is to find everything they need to know on the YouTube. They are unclear about why is there a need to interact with and respond to the emotions and thoughts of patients, and worse still families! They are distraught when required to do these seemingly burdensome tasks. They are perplexed about the relevance of humanities in Medicine, after they have been tutored to focus only on scientific facts since the 8th grade, topped in the same and entered the halls of Medicine with scientific pride.

Yet, they harbour no such doubt about investing their time in coaching classes, which helps them sharpen their factual multiple-

Homi Bhabha Cancer Hospital and Research Centre, Aganampudi,
Visakhapatnam 530053, Andhra Pradesh, India
VIDYA VISWANATH Department of Palliative Care

G.S. Medical College and KEM Hospital, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India
NANDINI VALLATH Division of Medical Humanities

Correspondence to VIDYA VISWANATH; drvidya21@gmail.com

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choice question cracking skills. The students are well aware; this is what will take them forward in their pursuit of all future medical degrees and economic security.

Are they to be blamed? Are they not programmed right from day 1 in medical school, to disengage from human beings and focus on parts of the body/organs? Rewind to the first day in the anatomy dissection hall—the awe and angst that the young student feels in the presence of a human corpse, is quickly and efficiently dispelled by the factual competence of anatomy teachers. The students are guided to focus on the details of each part and then the details of those details...reducing human sufferings, to findings under a microscope, or a scanner.

Has the focus of education changed much over the years? Is it a surprise that generations of our doctors come out of medical schools as highly competent technologists and prescriptionists?

Do we ever look upon anatomy halls as the abode where the mind of a doctor is born? Is it important that the students are helped to connect with that 'somebody'/'anybody', before they became 'bodies' for the dissection halls? Shouldn't we endeavour to maintain the centredness of all our medical education around the thinking, feeling human being?

Where do we start? Would it be helpful to display this letter, or similar notes, on the mighty entrance doorways of anatomy halls of the medical schools in our country? Can we encourage displaying a background note about each person who is now a body—not just the age, gender and cause of death, but a brief write-up of who they were, and what they cared for in life with an ode to their simple generosity and greatness of spirit?

Can we pay homage to the 'unknown bodies' through a brief poem or a piece of prose from our rich literature, chosen by the

imaginative, impressionable young minds of medical students because they ARE there for them to learn from? Would this help students connect what they see and do, with living, feeling human beings, right from the first day of their professional training?

It is possible that simple efforts in contextualizing their subjects to being human, may help medical students learn 'why' they are studying Medicine...that the ultimate goal of becoming a doctor is to help the patient get back to experiencing life fully. Emotionally, cognitively, along with physical and social well-being. Such a vision for their role as a doctor can guide them, to identify and respond to the dignity and quality of life concerns of persons who seek their help. Such an attitude could possibly counter the tyranny that today's specializations and technology have over the clinician's humanity and judgement; the tyranny that threatens to bury human sentiments under policies and protocols built around the reductionistic practice of medicine.

We probably owe some action, to gracious human beings like Dr Padmini, who gave her all when alive, and continued to be an instrument for learning beyond her death. As medical educators, are we capable of reflecting the same generosity of spirit in the way human bodies are presented, comprehended and handled, with all the gracious reverence for humanness that they so deserve?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the family of Dr Padmini and to Ms Yasodhara, the student who penned the 'Ode to a teacher who was. who is', for the permissions granted. They look upon this article as a plea to bring ourselves back to the root of being human and the connections that thrive us. The name Padmini is real, as per the wishes of the family.

We also acknowledge the Department of Anatomy, Andhra Medical College and King George Hospital, Visakhapatnam.

Obituaries

Many doctors in India practise medicine in difficult areas under trying circumstances and resist the attraction of better prospects in western countries and in the Middle East. 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