

Obituary

Panangipalli Venugopal (6 July 1942–8 Oct 2024)



8 October 2024 witnessed the loss of one of India's pathbreaking cardiovascular surgeon with the passing away of Professor Panangipalli Venugopal at the age of 82 years.

Dr Venugopal was born in Rajahmundry in the state of Andhra Pradesh into a farming family. A passion for medicine brought him to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi (AIIMS) where he completed his MBBS in 1963 securing the Institute Gold Medal for the best outgoing student. He then went to the Post Graduate Institute for Medical Education and Research in Chandigarh for his Masters in General Surgery. He returned to AIIMS for training in Cardiothoracic surgery under Professor N. Gopinath and obtained his MCh degree in Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery (CTVS) with honours. He was then inducted into the faculty of the department as a lecturer. In 1972 he went to the USA for further training and had the opportunity to train first under Dr S. Subramaniam, a leading pediatric cardiac surgeon in Buffalo and then under the legendary Dr Denton Cooley at the Texas Heart Institute.

Returning to AIIMS in 1974 he set about assisting Professor Gopinath in stabilizing the nascent open heart surgery programme and establishing the Cardiothoracic centre which was struggling to take off from the drawing board. Open heart surgeries those days were limited to one case a day, four to five days a week with sub-optimal results. Dr Venugopal along with Dr I.M. Rao and Dr Sampath Kumar worked hard to increase the numbers of cases and improve outcomes. When Professor Gopinath retired in 1982, Dr Venugopal took over as Head of the Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery.

The Cardiothoracic and Neurosciences Centre which had been envisaged way back in 1971 was finally commissioned in August 1985 and led immediately to a spurt in the number of open-heart surgeries. Under his leadership the centre grew from strength to strength and became established as the national leader in clinical services as well as training in cardiac surgery. The MCh programme in CTVS at AIIMS remains one of the most sought after in the country and now a couple of generations of cardiac surgeons in the country can trace their training lineage back to Professor Gopinath and Dr Venugopal. In all over 120 cardiac surgeons would have trained under Dr Venugopal, many of whom have made a name for themselves nationally and internationally. As Chief of the Cardiothoracic centre Dr Venugopal was also responsible for establishing new DM courses in cardiac subspecialties such as cardiac anaesthesia, cardiac radiology and cardiac intensive care.

In August 1984, Dr Venugopal performed the first successful heart transplant in India. This achievement earned him many accolades in academic and political circles. The first successful transplant paved the way for transplant surgery to become

widely available in many parts of the country today. He then went on to perform the first implantation of a left ventricular assist device in Asia, followed by heart transplants in patients who had been supported for extended periods on an assist device.

In 1990, Dr Venugopal was called by Sri Sathya Sai Baba for help in setting up a free superspecialty hospital in Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh where his ashram was located. Dr Venugopal worked tirelessly to see this ambitious project take shape and put all the resources he had to achieve the target of performing four open heart surgeries on the day the hospital was inaugurated, barely 6 months after the ground was dug to start construction of the building! For his efforts he was felicitated by the then Prime Minister, Shri Narasimha Rao. He continued to support the growth of the hospital in many ways and subsequently was actively involved in setting up a similar hospital in Whitefield in Bengaluru. Both these hospitals continue to provide yeoman services to the poor by providing high end cardiac surgeries and interventions totally free of cost.

While he was Chief of the Cardiothoracic Centre, he was appointed Dean of the AIIMS in 2002 and was then appointed as Director, AIIMS in June 2003 for a full term of 5 years. He instituted many reforms in the Institute during his tenure as Director, substantially increasing the bed strength, trifurcating the Dean's office to improve efficiency, expanding the Emergency facility amongst others. Not everyone agreed with his style of working and he had his fair share of troubles from detractors within and outside the Institution. His differences with the then Health Minister who also was ex-officio President of AIIMS eventually led to a legal battle in the highest court of the land, from which he emerged victorious. In 2008 he finally retired from the AIIMS after having spent nearly half a century in its service. He then continued to work in a few private hospitals in the National Capital Region of Delhi (NCR) till health issues prevented him from continuing. He however continued to be available to patients, students and young cardiac surgeons who sought his counsel.

Professor Venugopal was a multifaceted personality. He was a disciplinarian and hard taskmaster who expected his students to match his own standards of punctuality, hard work, devotion to patient care and academic excellence. Anyone arriving even a minute late for the morning 7 o'clock seminar would find the doors locked. Everyone had to be up-to-date with the latest publication in the subject that was being discussed. Needless to say he had read it all before anyone else! His devotion to patient care was intense and it was not unusual for him to walk into the intensive care unit (ICU) in the middle of the night just to ensure that his patients were doing well. Teaching was a passion and he made every effort to see that the training his students received was holistic. In the weeks prior to the final examinations it was not unusual for him to walk around the Institute campus with the exam going students, late in the evening discussing cases and important topics. However, behind that tough exterior was a soft heart that he took pains to hide. Students who were petrified by him in the hospital found a totally different person when they visited his house. No one could leave his house without being served a sumptuous meal

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.