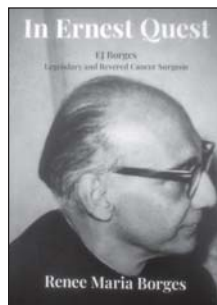


Book Review

In Ernest Quest: EJ Borges: Legendary and revered cancer surgeon. Renee Maria Borges. Goa:Cinnamonteal Design and Publishing; 2022. Price not mentioned, 417pp. ISBN 978-93-93984-01-2.



Medical autobiographies and biographies are always to be welcomed as there is much to be learnt from the lives of pioneering doctors and healthcare workers. Recent years have seen books (all autobiographies) by distinguished Indians such as Drs V.N. Shrikhande (*Autobiography of a surgeon*), P.N. Tandon (*Closed doors, open windows*) and T.E. Udawadia (*More than just surgery: Life lessons beyond the OT*). (The last two books have been reviewed in earlier issues of the *Journal*, while the first has been reviewed in *Indian J Med Ethics*). Interestingly, all three are surgeons.

Thus far, there has been no book chronicling the life and times of Dr Ernest Borges, India's greatest ever cancer surgeon and a pioneering surgeon who worked at the Tata Memorial Hospital (TMH), Bombay (now Mumbai) from 1941 to 1969. Yet, to call him just a cancer surgeon, would be a grave injustice. That many doctors are dedicated to their patients is true. Yet, very few manage to reach dizzying heights of patient care, and subsequently, devotion of the patients. Dr Borges achieved this. What set him apart?

Dr Renee Borges, his youngest daughter (and an evolutionary biologist, at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru) sets out to find out more about her father and enlighten us all about him. She was only 10-years-old when he passed away. For this book, Renee dug back into her memories, as well as those of her siblings, her father's colleagues and students and others. In the essays, we are told about his early years and later life, his gracious wife, Gracie, and memories and moments with the children and with friends and relatives.

Let me add, at this stage, a comment on conflict of interest. I have known members of the Borges family for decades and one of them (Dr Anita Borges, pathologist, previously at TMH) is my mentor, and I have met other members of the family at their homes, on many occasions. I am however, unlikely to be biased because of this. After all, even before I joined medical school, I had heard (from my father, a pathologist), about Dr Borges' reputation as a surgeon and above all, his humanitarian attitude, and the respect and affection that people had had for him. His funeral, I had been told, was the largest ever for a doctor in Bombay; it appears that just about everybody had had a connection with him.

I was aware of an anecdote from the mid-1960s. Apparently, a patient needed a new dressing and the young resident (later, my father's colleague, and from whom I heard this) agreed to do so, but after a short break. The resident returned to the ward after an hour—only to find the dressing already done! It turned out that Dr Borges was passing by and heard about an inpatient waiting for his doctor to do the dressing—and did it himself. He

later gently admonished his resident, explaining that what was a simple dressing for a doctor, was a major concern for the patient. As it turns out, this aspect of Dr Borges surfaces repeatedly in the book.

Another aspect that comes out is the sparkling sense of humour that the man had. This wit, often self-deprecating, illustrates his humility. My temptation to elaborate on some of these droll stories must be balanced by the fact that I do not wish to deprive you of the pleasure of reading them yourselves. As you will discover, he used his humour to also put his patients at ease. We also learn about the devout Catholic that he was, in addition to being a devout family man. The book contains numerous black and white photographs from the family's collection, as well as scripts of many of his research papers. Extracts from some of his scientific papers, as well as some of his toasts at various functions and some of the touching eulogies and tributes after his death, are also reprinted in this handsomely produced book.

The oral histories—by his students, staff nurse, secretary and a teacher—are quite illuminating and touching. Dr Prafulla B. Desai (who much later became the Director of TMH) was his favourite resident and perhaps knew Dr Borges better than anyone outside his family. That Dr Borges chose not to go abroad but decided to get operated in his own hospital by his own mentee is well known, at least to those of us who trained in TMH. A minor error in one of the oral histories needs to be corrected in the next edition: Dr Manu L. Kothari, the iconoclastic surgeon-turned-anatomist who had trained with Dr Borges in the 1960s has been referred to as a neurosurgeon at K.E.M. and Jaslok hospitals.

Dr Ernest Borges is remembered materially today by the roads that are named after him (one in Mumbai, appropriately the one on which TMH stands; and two in Goa), a bust in Goa, and on the cancer seal of the Indian Cancer Society, from 1971. Most importantly, his lament that the poor patients had to live on the footpaths outside the hospital, and his wish that something had to be done about it was finally realized two decades after this death, thanks to the perseverance of Dr Prafulla Desai. Dr Desai used his good offices and constructed the Dr Ernest Borges Memorial Home, where beds are provided to patients and relatives at affordable charges.

The phrase 'We shall never see his like again' is used often and is a bit trite. But in the case of this remarkable man, it is true—Dr Borges was one of a kind. In the half century that has gone past since he passed away, no doctor, however much loved and respected, has come close to him. He set the standard for all of us to follow and emulate.

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