

# Obituary

## Rustom A. Irani (1919–2013)



Dr Rustom A. Irani was born in 1919. He joined the Grant Medical College in 1934 and was the youngest medical graduate and postgraduate from the University of Bombay. He did his MD Pathology in 1941 and MS General Surgery in 1942. He served as a Major in the Indian army for four years and joined as a teacher the Grant Medical College, Sir J.J. Group of Hospitals at Byculla and B.J.

Wadia Hospital for Children in Parel, Bombay (now Mumbai). Though he was a general surgeon, he had a special interest in paediatric surgery. When he was promoted to the post of Honorary Professor, his general surgery unit at J.J. Hospital would take up all paediatric emergencies 4 days a week.

Major Irani had the foresight and wisdom to realize the need for a separate department of paediatric surgery. He single-handedly pursued this goal and successfully established the Department of Paediatric Surgery in the Byramjee Jejeebhoy Hospital for Children on the campus of the J.J. Hospital in 1967. It was not an easy task. He went around raising funds from the Tatas and other Parsee donors and put up paediatric surgical equipment to start a service department. Once this was well established, it was recognized by the then University of Bombay for training of postgraduates in paediatric surgery in 1972, a great milestone indeed!

At B.J. Wadia Hospital he headed the second surgical unit, the first one was headed by Dr Arthur De'Sa. The very first operation for tracheo-oesophageal fistula in Mumbai was performed at this hospital jointly by Dr De'Sa and Major Irani in 1953.

He became the dean of Wadia Hospital in 1955 and expanded the department of paediatric surgery by starting specialty units in plastic surgery, ENT and ophthalmic surgery. He retired in October 1977 from both J.J. and B.J. Wadia hospitals.

Major Irani had a private nursing home in the heart of the city where he not only operated on all kinds of general surgery cases, but also assisted his sister in gynaecological operations. What was surprising was that despite being an excellent surgeon with vast experience, he also did general practice for 2 hours every day. This was because he had promised his father, who was a general practitioner, that he would continue his father's practice.

After retiring from his teaching appointments at J.J. and B.J. Wadia hospitals, he stopped operating at his nursing home but continued his general practice almost till the very end when ill-health and repeated hospitalizations made it impossible for him to move out.

He was a very strict chief with military discipline and was always punctual, but, at the same time, very kind at heart. He was a bold surgeon but gentle with tissue handling. It was a treat to watch him operate. He always gave a lot of operative work and responsibility to his juniors and at the same time, supported his

residents fully. He was an excellent teacher in paediatric surgery, general surgery and surgical pathology.

When I wanted to go abroad for further studies he provided me a wide choice: Senior House Officer job in the UK, Senior Registrar's post in Australia with Mr D. Smith and a 3-year residency with Professor Ganz in the USA. All these stalwarts had stayed with him when they visited Mumbai. When I came back from the UK after doing my FRCS, I appeared for an interview at the Wadia Hospital. I was disappointed to learn that I was not selected, instead, a general surgeon with less experience was appointed. Papers were sent to Dr Irani for perusal and he realized that a full-time paediatric surgeon with a paediatric surgery degree was not appointed. He brought this to the notice of authorities and succeeded in having me appointed by creating an extra post. He also got a rule passed that only a person qualified in paediatric surgery would be appointed thereafter, as by then, the degree course in paediatric surgery had been established. Here was a man, who stood by his students in difficult times and saw to it that justice was done.

In one line, Major Irani was a straightforward, upright man, very disciplined, strict, a stickler for punctuality and cleanliness, an excellent surgeon, a wonderful teacher, but above all, a man with a kind heart and empathy for all. He departed for his heavenly abode on the morning of 18 June 2013.

May his soul rest in peace.

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I had heard a lot about Dr Irani from his resident doctors—that he was very strict, that he maintained an army-like discipline in his department, that you needed to know every detail about all the patients, that he did not spare anyone, etc. So, when I decided to go for an interview at Bai Jerbai Wadia Hospital for a post of resident doctor, I was anxious and scared. Dr R.A. Irani was then the Dean of Wadia Hospital. For moral support, I pleaded with my husband Milind, to accompany me to Wadia hospital. He waited outside the Dean's imposing office while I went in to face Dr Irani. He had a booming voice and a manner of speaking, which was very crisp, direct and without any inflections. The interview was over very quickly. He asked me to join as a registrar in his unit.

As I walked out of the Dean's office with a smile on my face, I saw the worried expression on Milind's face and I couldn't help myself. I burst out laughing and told him the good news. 'What was all that firing about?' he asked, as all he had heard was the booming voice of Dr Irani and had assumed that I was in big trouble!

Dr Irani, though he was so strict, had a very soft heart. I remember when I had to appear for my MS examination in

paediatric surgery, I was the only candidate and four stalwarts in the field were going to assess me—Professor P. Upadhyaya (All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi), Professors Ramakrishna and R.K. Gandhi (K.E.M. Hospital, Mumbai) and Major R.A. Irani. All had towering personalities. As if this were not enough of a scare, I had been throwing up the whole night, not as much because I was in my first trimester of pregnancy, but because I was scared out of my wits! The result was a foregone conclusion...I failed! But what I noticed and what touched me was that Dr Irani was looking so sad, he was visibly upset. This was the side I was witnessing for the first time. He had a child in him! His emotions showed very clearly on his face. At my next attempt, when my first-born had arrived a week prior to my examination, I was relaxed, and I passed. I still remember the smile that lit up Dr Irani's face. 'Mrs Kirtane, the sun is shining brightly today!' he said.

The last two to three years of his life were sad. Both Dr Irani and Mrs Irani were not keeping well. On one of my visits to him at Gazdar House, I found that both of them were sitting on a bench on the terrace of the building, in a pensive mood. I realized then

what they meant to each other. Shortly after that, Dr Irani took ill and was advised admission to Breach Candy Hospital under the care of Dr F.E. Udwardia. He sent for me. He did not want to go to the hospital. When I was trying to coax him, he said, he would get admitted provided I visited him twice a day. There was a time a year later, when both husband and wife were admitted to Breach Candy Hospital. Unfortunately, Mrs Irani passed away and with it Dr Irani's desire to live. I think he was just waiting to join her ... he suffered more from the absence of his soulmate than from the physical torture of a tracheostomy and a gastrostomy. I was not saddened by his death as that was what he had wanted, and it was peaceful.

I salute this great man: an excellent surgeon, a brilliant teacher, a loving husband and father, but above all, a beautiful human being. May his soul rest in peace.

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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