

'LIFE in Serving Others' - Dr Suranjan Bhattacharji

Dr Sara Bhattacharji was asked in January 2013 what Dr Suranjan Bhattacharji likes the most: Dr Sara's reply went beyond the question, and summarized the person, personality, life and work in a simple and telling manner: he loves 'working for others'.

A line from one of Dr. Suranjan's favourite poem reads: 'Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service', word she lives by. Politeness and humility personified, when he puts his arm to give a patient an affectionate embrace, it is a sight to behold, and a gesture that instantly starts the healing process.

Thinker, visionary, speaker par excellence, an outstanding writer, a deeply faithful person who believes completely in the Healing Ministry of Christ, friend, philosopher and guide to many from different walks of life, Dr Suranjan wears his accomplished life so lightly that you would never get even a partial picture of his body of work.

Staying away from the limelight, and letting the work and team get centre stage stayed an integral part of his approach to work even when he became Director, Christian Medical College and Hospital. He lives each day to the fullest with a deep appreciation of the past, an enriched sense of the present, and a joyous anticipation of the future.

A man of great intellectual integrity and scholarship, he always keeps abreast of the latest advances. His range of ideas on any subject, always fresh and stimulating, mesmerize us. Warm, approachable and open minded, he could hold the listener enthralled by his logical and intellectual acumen that can bring an analysis of any subject, mentally energizing us. He maintains very high professional standards with quick decision-making, clarity of thought and a passion for perfection.

He has championed effective low-cost rehabilitation, a must in an emerging-world context. He has been an inspiration to many physically challenged persons, doctors, therapists and people in society through his work, ethics, a spartan lifestyle and an ability to connect with people from across India with diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Dr Kurien Zachariah, an alumnus of CMC and a physiatrist who worked in CMC PMR & Rehab for several years, in an award-winning paper on PMR Development in India in 2000, summarised the critical role of Dr Suranjan in the evolution of the spinal injury rehabilitation model:

'Two Indians are jointly responsible for the creation of this model. Dr Mary Verghese, head of one of the first Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation Departments in India, was the beacon of hope for many spinal cord injured patients, because she herself was a spinal cord injured person.

The rehabilitation model she used is the now common orthopaedic model with its multi-disciplinary approach.

Following her demise, Dr Suranjan Bhattacharji continued her work. He had observed that a multiple speciality approach for such patients only fragmented the care, frustrated the doctors, quadrupled the costs and confused the patients.

It became obvious to him that when confronted with the multiple problems of the spinal cord injured patients, the existing models were inadequate because the problems spanned across the traditional sub-divisions of surgery and medicine.

Dr Suranjan trained himself in the three relevant surgical disciplines of orthopaedics, plastic surgery and urology. He then incorporated the relevant parts of the three specialities into Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, as it is being practised at the Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore for the past 15 (now 30) years.

Though this model was created for the holistic rehabilitation of spinal cord injured patients, it can also be used to comprehensively manage any group of patients'.

Fired by passion and the need to do the right thing at every turn in his life, Dr Suranjan draws inspiration from a wide range of people ranging on the timeline from ~~from~~ Florence Nightingale to Steve Jobs. At the top of the pecking order are Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore.

Gandhiji's approach to life entrances him and he is a practicing Gandhian. A couple of years ago, he remarked: 'the challenges India faces are so daunting that we need 1000 Gandhis, but we would be lucky if we get one Gandhi in the next 1000 years.'

An extraordinary well-and widely read person, Tagore's writings have left the deepest imprint, and he, especially, looks at two Tagore poems from Gitanjali for inspiration and guidance under all circumstances.

Dr Suranjan's leadership quality at PMR and his sterling example led to his assuming the role of Director of Christian Medical College, Vellore, in September 2007. This brought out all his skills to the fore.

His visionary thinking translated into envisioning a new campus in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. He is confident that despite hurdles, it will become another bastion of CMC. Also striking was the development of the Kagithapatarai_Campus with a particular focus on nursing.

Deeply aware of the changing economies, technologies and resources, he engaged with the present while broadening the institution's canvas for the future. As Director, he ushered the institution to a position of enhanced strength_on multiple fronts, striking as it happened in the toughest external environment in 80 years worldwide.

At PMR, Dr Suranjan took over the helm from Dr Bhaskar Samuel Padankatti in 1986. He initiated_the gait lab, bioengineering, stem-cell research and user-friendlier prosthetics and orthotics. Community-based rehabilitation, vocational rehabilitation, home visits, extended outreach programs, Rehab Mela, ~~s~~Sports and Mini Melas were initiatives masterminded by Dr Suranjan.

His work in research and publication is extensive, and he is widely published.

He realized the need to expand PMR & Rehab at CMC. A three-fold increase in beds was in place by 2005 in the Rehab, as we know today. PMR doctors and therapists have started to play an increasing role across different departments in CMC.

| Securing recognition as the WHO Collaborating Centre for Development of Rehabilitation Technology, Capacity Building and Disability Prevention was a major milestone.

| Yet, PMR was not his radar as a medical student. Seeking out a career in orthopaedics, he went about in a methodical manner picking up a Diploma and an MS. Destiny appeared to have earmarked him for Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation.

Born to Niranjan Bhattacharji and Monji Bhattacharji on March 9, 1953, Dr Suranjan spent his early years in Bihar. The field of medicine beckoned. He joined the MBBS program at Christian Medical College, Vellore, in 1969 to commence an ongoing, life-long association with the institution, and also his wife, Dr Sara.

| He received his MBBS degree in 1975. Seeking out a career in Orthopaedics, he obtained a Master's degree in the subject in 1982. He then worked in the Department of Plastic Surgery for 2 years.

At the request of the institution, he joined the PMR Department. Working with Paul Brand and Dr Mary Verghese provided deep insights into the world of rehabilitation. Dr Suranjan went to National Spinal Injuries Centre, Stoke Mandelville Hospital, ~~Aylesbury~~~~Ayelsbury~~, U.K. to complete specialisation in Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation.

This helped immensely as he envisioned PMR in CMC, Vellore, into a broader platform with a focus on low cost.

Dr Suranjan's wife, Dr Sara Bhattacharji had a trail-blazing career in community-based work and in developing Low Cost Effective Care Unit (LCECU) as the point of care for economically challenged people in and around Vellore.

Dr Suranjan Bhattacharji's relentless message is that CMC's mandate should continue to be the inclusive health care that challenged Dr. Ida Scudder and so many others after her. Life is a continuing activity in learning, loving and giving – ethos that define his life and are his guidepost for all of us.

S Vaidyanathan
Class of 1992, IIM Bangalore

Author's Note

It was my privilege to do this profile of Dr Suranjan Bhattacharji for his farewell celebration (March 9, 2013) at Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore.