

Ikon of the issue

Pour Water on Burns - Prof. M.H. Keswani



Prof. M. H. Keswani

Prof. Manohar Hariram Keswani was born in Sukker, presently in Sind, Pakistan, on the 8th of April, 1931, in a wealthy and privileged family. The family was impoverished by the partition of India and migrated to Salem in South India. Undaunted by this sudden turn of fortune, the young Keswani graduated from the Ferguson College in Poona in 1948 and did his professional training at The Seth Ghordandas Sunderdas Medical College and the King Edward Memorial Hospital in Bombay, where we were students of the same batch. It was there that we forged a friendship that lasted a life time.

Having qualified as a general surgeon in 1957, he applied for the much coveted post in cardiothoracic surgery at the Christian Medical College, Vellore, under Prof. Reeve H. Betts who pioneered cardiothoracic surgery in India and who was then blazing a trail in Vellore. This was a much sought after appointment and Keswani once told me that he was thrilled when he got the post. The rest of the story I shall relate in as near to his own words as I can remember, "Working with Betts in my spare time out of curiosity, I went to watch Dr. Mc Pherson who was working alone in plastic surgery and I fell in love with the subject. I went to see Prof. Betts in his office and asked for a transfer to Mc Pherson's unit. Hardly had I opened my mouth when Betts shouted and threw me out of his office. A month later, I gathered the courage and made bold to renew my request. This time, he sat me down and explained to me that I was throwing away an opportunity to train in a specialty for which there will be great demand in this country and that he had a lot of candidates who were waiting for this opportunity. Was I sure that I was doing the

right thing? I was rather overawed by the great man talking to me with such concern and sympathy. Rather foolishly, as I thought later, I kept repeating 'Sir, I have fallen in love with the work'. 'Then you must do what you want to do', said Betts, and 2 weeks later, I found myself reporting to Doctor Mc Pherson. It was here that I learnt the basics of plastic surgery and the art of tissue handling. Mc Pherson also taught me how to think. Vellore was fast becoming the Mecca of Surgery and there I came in contact with many eminent men – among them were Paul Brand and Noshir Antia, who were working together in rehabilitating patients suffering from leprosy. In 1960, at Dr. Antia's suggestion, I came back to Bombay and joined the J. J. Group of Hospitals as assistant to Dr. Rustom Irani who was then pioneering paediatric surgery in western India. I then moved to the Tata Department of Plastic Surgery as Assistant Professor to Dr. Noshir Antia who was then Head of the Tata Department of Plastic Surgery".

These were the beginnings of plastic surgery in India. Sir Harold Gillies was with Noshir Antia at the J. J. Group of Hospitals and Mr. Eric Peet was with Charles Pinto at the KEM Hospital. Dr. Keswani played a cardinal role in establishing the Tata Department on a solid foundation. It was here that he became known for his industry and craftsmanship.

Dr. Keswani's entry into Burns was a matter of chance. When he left the Tata Department on not a very happy note, all the plastic surgical departments in the city were already blocked by some of his own trainees and wherever he went he was asked, "Dr. Keswani, will you take up burns?" Burns then was a neglected subject – most of the patients were poor and there were no established departments in the country. Dr. Keswani rose to the challenge. In 1964, he went for further training to Birmingham and then to the University of Texas and to the US Army Research Hospital in the United States of America. In 1975, he set up the first paediatric Burns unit in the country at The Bai Jerbai Wadia Hospital

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for children in Bombay and also established the first skin bank in the year 1978. In 1992, he organised and started a state of the art burns department at the Masina Hospital which was called the Kharas Memorial Burns Department. In 1998, he planned and helped to set up a 16-bedded Burns Department at the Jubilee Mission Medical College Hospital in Trichur, Kerala, South India. In the year 2002, he ventured on a gigantic project – most of us advised him against it as we thought it impossible for one man to complete what he had in mind. With tremendous perseverance and courage and sinking his own meagre resources in it, he founded the National Burns Centre at Airoli in New Bombay. But by this time, his health was failing and he did not long survive the completion of this grand venture. This was perhaps his finest hour.

He was founder–Secretary of the Burns Association of India, The Indian Burns Research Society (the 3R Society) and the National Society of Equal Opportunities for the Handicapped. He made films directed by Mr. Shyam Benegal and Mr. Alique Padamsee on prevention of burns. Because of the suffering that it causes, the prevention of burns became a passion, almost an obsession with this man. He sent out a strong message to women on their safety in kitchens and his war cry was “Pour water on Burns”. He carried on this propaganda like a crusade till the end of his life.

There was also an innovative side to this man. His boiled potato peel bandages, tested and approved by research workers in Holland, and his use of curds to debride a burns wound, were a few of his many little innovations. His work on burns was internationally recognised by Britain, America and Europe by bestowing upon him their three most prestigious awards – the James Lang Memorial prize of the

British Burns Association, the Evans Memorial Award of the American Burns Association and the Whitekar Award of the European Burns Association.

Manohar Keswani was not a conventional plastic surgeon; neither was he a conventional man. This remarkable, self-effacing and modest individual was recognised and lauded for his work on burns. Few knew of his prowess, versatility and innovative skills in general plastic surgery. His primary and secondary cleft work, his work on hypospadias, his rhinoplasties and the fantastic results he achieved with his vaginoplasties and his pioneering sex change operation and the skill with which he could cut large skin grafts to mathematical precision will long be remembered by his close associates. I once gave him a particularly difficult secondary cleft lip correction to do. He laboured over the child for over 3 hours, undid the whole lip twice and at the end of it gave the child a lovely Cupid's bow, well-matched philtral columns, a full vermillion and a dead symmetrical nose following no set plan. At the end of it all, lost in admiration, I asked him, “How did you do it Manohar?” His answer was, “I really don't know Hirji. You saw me do it, didn't you?” He was improvising all the time drawing heavily, I think, on past experience.

It is little known that he had published several slim volumes of poetry. A connoisseur of art, he had both the hand and the heart of an artist. Above all, I shall remember him as a gentleman par excellence, patient, caring, kind and ethical to the core.

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