

Icon of this issue



Prof. Sudhir Kumar Bhatnagar

Prof. Sudhir Kumar Bhatnagar: Imagination is the beginning of creation!

Prof S. K. Bhatnagar (SK or SKB too many of his friends and acquaintances) was born on 1st November 1942 in Lahore, was the eldest of three brothers. A large part of his early childhood was spent in Shanghai China where his father was posted as a diplomat in the Ministry of external affairs. On his return from China, he completed his schooling from Delhi and then joined SN Medical College Agra for his MBBS. There he came in close contact with Prof. H. S. Asopa then professor in Surgery who was doing majority of reconstructive surgery, especially hypospadias corrections. His association with Prof. Asopa influenced his decision to be a surgeon. Subsequently, he joined the department of surgery at AIIMS under the legendary Prof. Atamprakash,. It was during his residency at AIIMS, that his father met with a bus accident with resulted in severe crush injury to both lower limbs.

During the treatment of his father, he came in close contact with various reconstructive procedures like skin grafting and tube pedicle flaps, which attracted the young and impressionable resident towards plastic and reconstructive surgery. He literally crossed the road to join the vibrant and upcoming Department of Plastic Surgery at Safderjung Hospital New Delhi. There he worked under Padamshri Prof. J. L. Gupta and Prof J. L. Srivastava, with whom he shared a lifelong bond of trust and respect.

Soon after MCh, on the instructions of Prof Atamprakash he joined the Post Graduate Department of Plastic Surgery at KGMC Lucknow in 1976 from where, after 31 years of glorious service to his patients and to the Institution, he retired as Professor and Head of the Department in 2007.

Having retired with great satisfaction, he continued to be active academically and professionally by attending many of the teaching sessions in his Department and Plastic Surgery conferences. Post retirement, he accepted an assignment as consultant plastic surgeon at Vivekanand Hospital Lucknow, started a DNB programme there and worked till his untimely passing away in 2009.

FAMILY

He was a perfect family man. Eldest of a large joint family he had a perfect balance between his family and professional life. To all of them, he was the one big pillar of support and strength. All of them would turn to him for guidance and support in times of adversity. He encouraged everyone, even outside the medical field, to study, get more qualifications and better their lot in life. To his sons, he was a strict disciplinarian; however, he would always find time to sit and discuss all aspects of life with them.

His wife Dr. Archana, also a doctor by profession, was a perfect companion, not only supporting him in all his endeavours, but also being an independent individual. She still runs her own hospital, which was started in 1980 with Dr. Bhatnagar with a mission to help the poor and the underprivileged. She witnessed and learnt a lot of surgery first hand, along with the steps of each operation, which he did. That is another of the great qualities that he had, patience to explain everyone who was interested in the art and craft of reconstructive surgery. So well-versed was she that I learned my first steps in surgery and suturing from her rather than my father.

His two sons are settled in Lucknow, Dr. Shrish is a Paediatric Gastroenterologist while Dr. Ankur is consultant plastic surgeon at Sanjay Gandhi PGI Lucknow.

ACADEMIC

A plastic surgeon par excellence, a great teacher and indeed a unique human being, he shouldered a lot of

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responsibilities during his illustrious professional career as well as in his social life.

Prof. Bhatnagar was an imaginative teacher, an innovative researcher, a meticulous surgeon and completely dedicated to his craft. To a whole generation of plastic surgeons he was a teacher par excellence, who insisted on clinical perfection as well as sound academic knowledge. Knowledge, though essential is relatively easy to acquire. He gave his students the wisdom of using this knowledge, progressively, purposefully, productively, positively, and profitably for self and society. That is what he; professed, preached and practiced. While in harness and even more, after his retirement he took a very personal interest in the development of our specialty. His work — clinical, research and academic was monumental, not only from the point of view of individual patient treatment, but also instrumental in establishing the principles of treatment evolved during that time. Many of these like interdisciplinary collaboration while treating Clefts, Facio-Maxillary Injuries and Head and Neck Cancers, are the norm today, but were considered bold initiatives when he proposed them in those early days. He was a visionary and always ahead of his time, as a young MBBS trainee in early 90's I could overhear him telling his students and peers that Microsurgery and Smile train project will be the next big things in plastic surgery.

Prof. Bhatnagar was Secretary of APSI for 6 years, President of the Association of Plastic Surgeons of India (2000) and National Academy of Burns, India (2003) and Member Governing Council Association of surgeons of India. He was bestowed with Rashtriya Chikitsak Ratan Award (2001), Peet Prize (1987) and Gold Medal for Best Article published in Indian Journal of Surgery (1989). He was also a Member of Curriculum Committee (Plastic Surgery) - Medical Council of India and Fellow of the National Academy of Medical Sciences. He organised two APSICONS one at Lucknow in 1997 and the other at Agra in 2000. During the APSICON 2000 in Agra, where as President of the Association, he first introduced Smile Train to the Indian plastic surgery fraternity. It was his innovative thinking which resulted in the organisation of hands on cartilage framework carving workshop for ear reconstruction using bovine cartilage obtained from slaughter houses!

He was responsible for training many capable plastic surgeons, who are the teachers of today. He was noted for his drive and enthusiasm. His students, recall how he

was ready to discuss ideas with anyone — whether the highest ranking professor or a junior medical student and approaching him with a query was never intimidating. He was also noted for his ability to get down to the basic principles in surgery and his assumption that if anything can be thought out, it can be done was truly infectious. His students were made to believe that once their mind stretched to a new idea, it would never go back to its original timid and restricted dimension! He strongly felt that 'knowledge is to be shared and not hidden away. He would always stand by junior surgeons and colleagues and help them out of troubles with sound advice and guidance. Little wonder that even today, his name evokes respect and reverie amongst all. Even the theatre staff and workers of the department used to narrate to me about the memories of his skill, dexterity and compassion for one and all. Even till his end, he was consulted for his considered advice and guidance to solve the problems.

He was invited as an examiner by many universities, and he earned a reputation as one of the fairest of examiners who laboured to bring out the best from his students.

He had 64 research publications, 86 podium presentations in National and International Conferences, and had authored 6 chapters in textbooks. His publications have received 371 citations in International Journals of repute with one paper on Lateral Thoracic Region Flap getting 101 citations till 2007. He had helped in designing and standardising 5 new flaps, and that alone is a testament to his motto in life that 'Imagination is the beginning of creation!' He could not just imagine new and better things; he could become new and better in our eyes every day. A teacher who inspired his students to become like him and then take the goal post a bit farther every day, by setting higher and loftier standards. He was the most worthy recipient of the prestigious B.C Roy Award for an eminent teacher.

HOBBIES

Prof Bhatnagar was a person of diverse interests and hobbies. Photography was his passion as was Cricket, Urdu Poetry and Music. He greatly enjoyed the Ghazals and enthralled one and all with his recitation of Urdu couplets. Few knew him to be a man of languages, where he had complete command over German, which he could read and write equally well. In every meeting, he would deservedly get all the adulations and admirations of his peers, students and junior colleagues. His brightly

coloured shirts, which he wore in APSI meetings, were the embodiment of his equally multifaceted personality.

PHILANTHROPY

He was very much active on the social front also as an active member of the Lions Club International, where he went on to become the Multiple Council Chairman. He was instrumental in organising free Cataract Surgery camps in the villages around Lucknow for almost 20 years. Even as a member of the Lions club International, he was looked upon as great organiser and motivator. His penchant for 'positive attitude' and getting everybody together made him a natural team leader. For his zeal and commitment to social service, he was posthumously given the lifetime achievement award by Lions Club international.

CONCLUSION

I am yet to see a teacher like him who believed in his students when even they were not sure of themselves. He made it a point to stay in touch with his students

and would always ring them up when he came to their city. Each time he met them he was the same energetic, optimistic, euphoric and cheering up personality that they always found him as. Nothing gave him more pleasure than seeing his students breaking new barriers and excelling themselves in their field. Even during his last days his sole concern was the progress and welfare of his students. We shall remember him as an enthusiastic person, eager to help and one who was equally liked by his seniors, contemporaries and his juniors, and above all, an excellent human being.

Ankur Bhatnagar

Department of Plastic Surgery, SGPGIMS,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

Address for correspondence:

Dr. Ankur Bhatnagar, Department of Plastic Surgery, SGPGIMS,
Lucknow - 226 014, Uttar Pradesh, India.

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