

Obituary



Michael Felix Freshwater (1948–2016)

Michael Felix Freshwater

Michael Felix Freshwater died on October 1, 2016. An epitome of professional integrity and academic excellence, he was an untiring educator and a valuable member of the I.J.P.S. family. He reviewed 153 articles for IJPS apart from several re-reviews. In fact, his last review was on September 27, 2016, 3 days before his death. He never communicated to us regarding his illness, unavailability or temporary absence.

Felix, as he was known to his friends and colleagues, was born in New York City on February 4, 1948. He graduated from Stuyvesant High and Brooklyn College. Here, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and received his Bachelor of Science degree magna cum laude and the Jonas Scholarship with which he attended Yale School of Medicine. After leaving Yale, he spent almost three years as a fellow in the Division of Plastic Surgery at Johns Hopkins. He then went to Miami for his plastic surgery residency under the one and only Ralph Millard, who revolutionised cleft lip surgery. Millard knew that Felix was interested in hand and microsurgery and encouraged Felix to get further training at what was then the foremost centre at the time, Jewish Hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. After completing his training in hand surgery, he returned to Miami in late 1979 where he started practicing and joined the medical school faculty where he was a voluntary professor of surgery.

Felix loved to call himself a “hand doctor” and not a “hand surgeon” primarily because he felt surgery was the last resort in his practice. In one of his letters to the editor, he wrote that while seeing patients free of charge in a local fair, he observed that people were reluctant to have even free consultations from a surgeon as opposed to a doctor. Until the introduction of ether and antisepsis in the 19th century, surgeons were held in low regard by society, particularly when compared to physicians. Typically, surgeons drained pus, excised skin lesions or amputated parts. Doctors – that is, physicians – were more respected, despite the fact that they never cured anybody and had but two effective drugs – laudanum for pain and foxglove

for dropsy. Hence, Felix wondered why the doctor’s status in society was loftier than the surgeon’s. He felt that the doctor performed a function that society still valued highly even in the good old days, they predicted the future: who would recover, who would not; who would live and who would die. Felix felt that we should introduce ourselves as “hand doctors” who care about diagnosing and treating patients rather than “hand surgeons” who concentrate on cutting, sewing, scoping, setting or securing parts. In fact, Felix had a 90–90 rule: 90% of the patients whom he saw in a hospital emergency department needed surgery while 90% of the patients whom he saw in the office did not. The latter set had two complaints – pain and lump and that required a proper diagnosis and treatment, which on most occasions were conservative!

Throughout his career, Felix was concerned about patient access to plastic surgery and the global shortage of plastic surgeons. For decades, he served as consultant for a number of local clinics to the indigent. Felix realised that there was a need for an organised unit in South Florida that was devoted to the emergency care of hand and microsurgery patients, and Cedars Medical Centre supported this project by establishing a program there that willingly accepted all patients regardless of their ability to pay.

In the 1980s, he regularly travelled to South America to lecture and to perform surgery but he soon realized that there were a better means of treating patients. He arranged for Latin American plastic surgeons to study under him in Miami at Cedars and continued this programme for several years. Academics were always his forte, and he was always an educator at heart. He found the best way of educating other plastic surgeons was serving on the editorial boards of six international peer-reviewed journals published everywhere from the United States to India, and Indian Journal of Plastic Surgery was privileged to have him in the reviewer’s panel and later on as a prestigious member of its International Advisory Board for almost a decade. He

was a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of Journal of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery and was awarded honorary membership by British Association of Plastic Surgeons for his contribution to the journal.

Felix published 160 scholarly articles which are not only a treasure trove of hand surgery but also a lesson in medical and research ethics. I still remember while writing about surgical malpractice, he was livid and coined a term “wallet biopsy” for those who were offering unwanted surgeries to patients only because they could afford to pay!

Felix is survived by his wife Melodye Stokes, mother Mildred Freshwater and son David Freshwater. With the demise of Felix, the Indian Journal of Plastic Surgery has lost a great reviewer, and I am left without a very good friend. May his soul rest in peace and May God give strength to his family to bear this unfathomable loss.

Surajit Bhattacharya

Sr. Consultant, Department of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery, Sahara Hospital, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India
E-mail: surajitbh@yahoo.co.in

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as the author is credited and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

Access this article online	
Quick Response Code: 	Website: www.ijps.org
	DOI: 10.4103/0970-0358.197241

How to cite this article: Bhattacharya S. Michael Felix Freshwater. Indian J Plast Surg 2016;49:436-7.