Professor B. Ramamurthi: A note of debt, and an inspiring example of the goodness of man

I have known Professor Ramamurthi for 15 years or so. He was very highly regarded by Paul Bucy and Eben Alexander, former Editors of Surgical Neurology. Professor Ramamurthi served on the Editorial Board of Surgical Neurology for many years and made many fine contributions to the journal.

In the February 2004 issue, he wrote about the materialism affecting neurosurgeons and physicians. He was concerned that the proliferation of technology was impeding the extension of neurosurgery to the poor and needy. Neurosurgeons, he felt, have come to believe that they cannot help others without the aid of technology. However, it was his belief that much of what is done in neurosurgery can be performed with simpler instruments and with great success. He did this for many years when he began neurosurgery in India. He was concerned that the effects of globalization have deprived the developing nations of the infrastructure necessary to support their people in schooling, roads, and the development of fundamental services. The money coming to the country was not being spent on those things essential to the people. In the January 2004 issue, he commented on resident education and noted the value in the apprentice type of learning. He was always concerned about others. That was the basis of his religious teaching.

His devout belief and practice of Hinduism permeated everything he did and said. Professor Ramamurthi showed us how it was essential for a neurosurgeon to be a humble and compassionate human being. How can one be so outstanding in his/her accomplishments and yet so fundamentally simple, pure and honest? Professor Ramamurthi provided us the example.

What he gave to India in founding neurosurgery and leading young people to become physicians will leave an indelible mark on neurosurgery, neurology, the people he influenced and trained, and the people who were affected by his teaching and work. What an enormous contribution to mankind! His grace, his superior character, and his soul touched me for life. For his great gift, I am indebted to Professor Ramamurthi, to his wife and son Ravi for allowing me to share this prize, and to my friends and colleagues in India who helped such a superior human being to develop and to influence the rest of the world.

He represents the tranquility of the Indian people from which others can learn lessons of life.

When my wife and I visited the Ramamurthis in Chennai, I remember asking Professor Ramamurthi what he was doing neurosurgically at that time when he was 78 years of age, after coronary artery bypass surgery. He told me that “he left the teaching of the techniques to the younger neurosurgeons; he taught humanity”. I have never forgotten that quote for it says everything about the man. What are most important to every person are the qualities of humanity and compassion. The material things come and go, but the fundamental commitment we must all have is to humanity. That is what Professor Ramamurthi represents to me, and I believe, to all who knew him.

So, I thank you for the opportunity to pay a large debt of gratitude in a small way to Professor Ramamurthi, and to his family, and to my Indian colleagues, who are his pupils. In the course of human existence, he stands out as one of those people who have shown that total belief in and devotion to humanity and goodness is achievable, and is fulfilling. For those of us who witnessed this greatness, we were humbled.

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