Obituary

Dr. L. K. Bhutani (05.09.1936 - 24.07.2004)

Professor Bhutani died unexpectedly and prematurely on July 24, 2004, a few weeks short of his 68th birthday. He had been diagnosed with chronic lymphoid leukemia a year earlier that was consciously left untreated. In May 2004, he suddenly took ill with high fever and was hospitalized at AIIMS. Septicemia was discovered the source of which remained elusive. A series of complications followed and culminated in fatal renal failure. As befits the ex-Dean and Director of AIIMS, Dr. Bhutani received the best medical care the Institute could provide, care that is reserved for VIP’s and dignitaries, and he had on his bedside his wife Manorama, an eminent obstetrician and gynecologist, sons Nitin and Nishit, the extended family and many friends and colleagues.

The eldest of six children, Lalit Kumar Bhutani was born in Punjab, and studied medicine at the Amritsar Medical College. He came to AIIMS soon after it had been founded intending to become an internist but destiny lay elsewhere. He came under the influence of the late Professor K. C. Kandhari, his teacher from Amritsar, who persuaded him to do an MD in dermatology instead. Lalit succumbed and the rest is history!

For someone, who did not wish to be a dermatologist, he ended up becoming a great dermatologist. In his long and distinguished career he conquered every academic peak. He succeeded Professor Kandhari to be the Professor & Head of the Department of Dermatology and Venereology at AIIMS in 1979, a position he took to great heights until his retirement in 1996. He retired as Dean and Director of AIIMS in 1996. He served as the President of the Indian Association of Dermatologists, Venereologists and Leprologists in 1981-82. He was Honorary Physician to the President of India (1983-87). He was the only Indian dermatologist to be made the honorary fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (FRCP) in 1987.

He traveled the globe attending conferences, giving lectures and, more importantly, representing his country. He was a gifted teacher and this was recognized with the Dr. B. C. Roy award for excellence in teaching in 1980. He was an adviser to the World Health Organization and participated in STD associated programs in Bangladesh, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Singapore and Sri Lanka. He trained at St. John’s in London, served as a visiting professor at the Mayo Clinic and, later, as a Professor at the King Faisal University in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, he created a residency program in dermatology that till date is the only one of its kind. His crowning glory was the VII International Congress of Dermatology in Delhi in 1994 that he organized and chaired.

Dr. Bhutani was a keen researcher and a prolific writer. He built up formidable collaborations with pathologists and immunologists. He made major contributions in the fields of leprosy, pigmentation, porphyrias and STD’s. He served on the editorial boards of several prestigious journals including the International Journal of Leprosy, Journal of Dermatological Treatment, and Seminars in Dermatology. His Color Atlas of Dermatology (1982) and Color Atlas of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (1986) were internationally acclaimed.

For someone who resembled the late King Hussain of Jordan, Dr Bhutani was a quintessential Englishman – well-dressed, well-mannered, and well-spoken. He was a prima donna who gracefully occupied his ivory tower.

Now he’s gone! Only the footprints remain!!

Raj Kubba
New Delhi, India.