Obituary

Dr. Anil D. Desai (1924-2006)

Sunil K. Pandya
Department of Neurosurgery, Jaslok Hospital and Research Centre, Dr. G. V. Deshmukh Marg, Mumbai - 400 026, India

Dr. Anil Desai died on 30 August 2006 as he had desired – with his boots on and still in harness. After a pleasant lunch with friends, as he walked towards his car he suddenly passed away.

Born on 27 June 1924 in the family of a businessman, he spent his childhood with the royal family of Orchha and acquired a nobility of spirit that prevailed in his dealings with others to the end.

He studied at the Seth G. S. Medical College and its affiliated K. E. M. Hospital in Bombay from 1941 to 1946. After serving as house physician in his alma mater he proceeded to Britain where he qualified for MRCP from Edinburgh in 1951. (This college honored him with Fellowship in 1971.)

He worked under the guidance of Mr. Norman Whalley, neurosurgeon at Morriston Hospital, Swansea and was asked to pursue a career in neurosurgery but his preference was for neurology and to that end he worked with Dr. Natrass and Dr. (Later Lord) John Walton at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He also worked with Dr. Henry Miller at the Royal Victoria Infirmary at Newcastle. He planned further study at the National Hospital, Queen Square with Drs. Carmichael, Walshe, Dennis Williams and Macdonald Critchley but had to return to Bombay in 1952 at his father's request.

He was appointed Research Assistant at his alma mater in 1952. He had already developed an interest in epilepsy and attended to patients attending Dr. N. S. Vahia’s clinic at the K. E. M. Hospital. Drs. Vahia and Desai set up an EEG laboratory. He continued in this capacity till he joined Dr. Homi M. Dastur as Assistant Honorary Neurologist in the Department of Neurosurgery in 1958. He rose progressively to the post of Professor.

His help in developing the fledgling department of neurosurgery complemented the efforts of Dr. Homi Dastur. Whilst Dr. Dastur attended to tests such as ventriculography, angiography and pneumoencephalography and then continued with surgery, Dr. Desai attended to patients in the daily outpatient’s clinic, did the ward rounds and wrote clinical notes. In a couple of years the department developed a formidable reputation. Drs. Dastur and Desai set up a system of medical case records that remains unparalleled in India. Using this simple, unsophisticated system that required nothing more than pen, paper and effort, we can, even today, pull out the case notes, X-ray films, EEG records, pathology reports and follow-up notes of any patient from 1957 onwards given just the first name of the patient and the year in which he was seen at the neurosurgery clinic. The time taken to get these records is seldom more than five minutes.

They developed a departmental library that remains the envy of all visiting neuroscientists. Starting with a handful of texts, it now has volumes on the history of the neurosciences; numerous reference volumes on neurology, neurosurgery, neuroradiology, neuropathology; the entire series of Neurology India, Clinical Neurosurgery and other journals. This was one of the first departments in India to possess the Schaltenbrand atlas for stereotaxic surgery. It has inherited Dr. R. G. Ginde’s library including a complete set of reprints of papers published from the Montreal Neurological Institute whilst Drs. Wilder Penfield and William Cone served there.

In 1962, at Dr. Dastur’s urging, he traveled to Dr. Narabayashi’s clinic in Japan to learn stereotactic surgery for the treatment of patients with disorders of the basal ganglia. Together with Dr. Dastur he started treating such patients using a frame developed by himself based on the Narabayashi model. He struggled to find the right insulation for the stereotaxy needles and ensured that the department had a steady supply of these manufactured locally.

Drs. Dastur and Desai invited Dr. Ilona Bubelis from New York to help develop neuropathology at the K. E. M. Hospital. Dr. Bubelis found an enthusiastic trainee in Dr. D. H. Deshpande who continued to develop the department after Dr. Bubelis returned to America.

In 1964, stimulated by Dr. John Walton's work, he started research on disorders of the muscles. He returned to Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1968 to learn histochemical....
Obituary

techniques, which he then set up at the K. E. M. Hospital together with Dr. Deshpande. Dr. Desai was one of the first workers to suggest central nervous system involvement in what was hitherto considered ‘primary muscle disease’ – a stand vindicated later by observers elsewhere in the world.

In 1969 he obtained a PL480 grant from the Government of the United States for the study of patients with epilepsy and set up a special clinic for such patients at the K. E. M. Hospital.

His publications cover a wide spectrum. Especially noteworthy are those on muscular dystrophies, epilepsy and sleep studies.

On retirement from the K. E. M. Hospital in 1982 he was appointed Emeritus Professor.

He joined Jaslok Hospital and Research Centre in 1973 and continued on its staff till his death.

The Neurological Society of India honored him by electing him President in 1967. He served the Society as Secretary from 1956-1964 and as Editor of Neurology India from 1965-1978. Drs. Desai and Dastur spent hours in the library each day looking up every reference in each paper to ensure that it was relevant and accurate. Several papers were virtually rewritten. During Dr. Desai’s term as Editor, the journal was included in Index Medicus. Dr. Desai’s Presidential Oration was on psychomotor epilepsy and predictably included not only neurological wisdom but also references to Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Van Gogh and Fyodor Dostoevsky. In 1974 the Society appointed him Dr. Jacob Chandy Orator. He spoke on Duchenne dystrophy.

Widely traveled, fond of Indian classical music and blessed with a wide circle of friends, he had his share of joy, which he greatly relished. He also bore the mark of pain when his only child suddenly took ill and passed away on the eve of her wedding. Myocardial infarction in 1966 and later episodes of cardiac ischemia did not diminish his endeavors. If anything, he was even more enthusiastic, setting up the Muscular Dystrophy Foundation, trying to develop a muscle pathology laboratory at the Jaslok Hospital and enthusing younger colleagues to continue where he had left off.

Dr. Homi Dastur has often expressed his admiration for the manner in which Dr. Desai put in 12 and 14 hours of work several decades ago despite myocardial infarction and diabetes mellitus needing insulin injections. It is salutary to recall that there were no facilities, then, for monitoring blood sugar by instruments such as the modern glucometers. He had learnt to detect early hypoglycemia from its symptoms and correct it without any interruption in work. Certainly, he never let his illnesses serve as dampeners to his efforts in the department at K. E. M. Hospital or elsewhere. At times Dr. Dastur would experience a sense of alarm at the manner in which Dr. Desai coped under trying circumstances. Dr. Desai would reassure him and continue with the task at hand with equanimity.

Dr. Desai leaves behind his widow - Dr. Usha Desai - with whom he spent many happy and memorable years.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Drs. Usha Desai and Manju Tanna for providing the photograph of Dr. Anil Desai used with this obituary. I thank Dr. Homi Dastur for sharing his memories of Dr. Anil Desai with me and for improving the obituary note I had prepared.