S Krishnamurthy—Tribute to a Doyen in Oncology

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“In a nation where a large majority speaks of Gandhian values but hardly a handful practices it, the significance of his life and work are monumental.”

His Ancestry

Dr. Krishnamurthy was born in 1919 to illustrious parents Dr Sundara Reddy and Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy. His mother was India's first woman medical graduate (1912), social reformer and a freedom fighter. She along with two Europeans founded the Women's India Association (WIA) in 1918. In the 1920s, she fought against the Devadasi system. Incidentally she was the world's first woman Vice-President of a Legislature (1927). Her younger sister died battling an advanced rectal cancer which at that time was considered to be 'Karma vyadhi' (disease of destiny). She started her quest to set up a separate cancer hospital and battled on for three decades to persuade people that cancer was curable. She was later awarded the 'Padma Bhushan' in 1956.

His Education and Early Career

S Krishnamurthy passed MBBS in 1942 and MS in 1946. In 1947, he went abroad to work as a Fellow of the Ellis Fischel State Cancer Hospital, Missouri, U.S., and later, at the Royal Cancer Hospital, London. Right through, he immersed himself in oncology, an interest that was to dictate the rest of his life. He returned to India to serve the cause of poor patients and joined the cancer unit at General Hospital at Chennai (then Madras). In that place he had another parallel battle to fight—against rampant corruption. After an unsuccessful battle against the administration, he later left the place to join his mother's venture to serve the poor at the cancer institute.

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The Cancer Institute

Krishnamurthy's interest in cancer was fuelled by his mother and he dedicated his entire life to that passion. Dr Muthulakshmi's dream to start a cancer hospital was realized in 1954 as a single unit with 12 huts with the help of WIA and thus began the Cancer Institute (WIA) at Adyar, Chennai. She was the inseparable part of all his further endeavors. It hardly had any diagnostic and therapeutic facilities. It was the only cancer hospital in south India, established as a voluntary, charitable, non-profit institution with public donations. He was the Institute's first Resident Medical Officer and helped change the attitude of the people towards cancer by educating them that the disease was curable. He was then joined by another saint Dr V Shantha who had worked under him at the General Hospital. His entire life was focused on trying to eradicate cancer. He took over as its Director in 1959 and today the Institute boasts of 423 beds and is one of the finest regional cancer centres in India for comprehensive cancer care. Even today about 2/3 patients (of over one hundred thousand total patients seen in a year) are treated free or subsidized.

As a Teacher

He was immensely talented as a theory teacher and a master clinician. His impromptu lectures on various topics on basic oncology were awesome and his understanding of the subject was phenomenal. If any one of us were to go through the case records of the late 50's and 60's which he had written (I had the privilege of seeing a few of them), the clarity and meticulousness with which he had documented the case would make most of us hang our heads in shame. He taught and insisted on thorough case evaluation, accountability and honesty. The system he had established at the Cancer Institute ensured the same.

As a visionary, one of his outstanding achievements in medical education was the introduction of the concept of super specialty training in oncology which started in 1982 after a decade of struggle. Cancer Institute (WIA) was thus the first centre to start Surgical Oncology (MCh) and Medical Oncology (DM) courses in India. This led to the start of similar programmes in other centres and in opening of these new departments in many medical colleges thus establishing them as distinct specialties.

As a Clinician

He started to practice multimodality therapy in cancer as early as 1960's which is today's state of the art. Screening

programmes were done for early detection of cancer, which included the first Chenglepet cancer survey with opportunistic screening in 1961 and the first International cancer Control Project in Kanchipuram in 1967.

He was instrumental in ensuring a number of other firsts at the Cancer Institute (WIA) which included Cobalt-60 Teletherapy (1960, first in Asia), Nuclear Medicine (1956), Paediatric Oncology (1960), Linear Accelerator (1976), Blood component therapy (1978), Hyperthermia (1984), Nd-Yag Laser (1985) and Intraoperative radiotherapy (1992).

Special Traits

The greatness of a man is not how he basks in success but how honestly he reacts to defeats. In one such incident he had guts to document "wrong selection of case by me" on one of the case sheets and sign underneath! Another memorable instance was his advice to students "Start where I ended and progress to reach greater heights. If you start where I started you are likely to end where I ended which would be self defeating". In today's self centered society how many of our teachers would wish and bless us like this let alone allow us to do that?

Recognition

He presented papers at several national and international conferences and authored several international journal articles. Some of them on multimodal therapy defined a paradigm shift in therapeutic options.

In recognition of his contribution in the field of cancer, the government awarded him the Padma Shri in 1970. From 1965, he was a member of one or more committees of the World Health Organization till 1982. In 1983, he became a member of the Advisory Committee on Cancer Control and Planning of the Central government.

This tribute to S Krishnamurthy would be incomplete without saluting to his mother (Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy), Dr V Shantha and the cancer institute itself. Amidst them, history is so intricately interweaved and inseparable that it would be impossible to isolate one of them.

His Last

After dedicating the entire life to cancer science and patient care, he breathed his last on July 2nd 2010 keeping many of us wondering whether we would see such a human again in our lives.