A Tribute to Professor N C Misra—Pioneer and Leader in Oncology

Sanjeev Misra

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I falter in finding words to express my feelings in writing about Prof N C Misra whom I had known since the day I was born as a loving father, then as a teacher and later as a senior colleague.

Initial Years—Education and Early Career

Dr. Naresh Chandra Misra was born in 1936 at Etawah, Uttar Pradesh in a family of doctors. His father Dr. R R Misra was a senior doctor in the State Medical Services and his mother Mrs. Annapurna Devi a social worker and housewife. His father was in a transferable job and as a result of it he had his schooling in different cities and this gave him a chance to see the diverse situations in the state. He completed his college education from the prestigious Ewing's Christian College, Allahabad and was elected its college captain and was also awarded the All-round NCC cadet for 1952.

He had a great desire to join the Indian Army as he had many uncles who had served in II World War. Unpredictable as life is, his father died in 1952. His father's last wishes were that he should take up medicine as none of his children had opted for medicine as a career. Needless to say that his ambition to serve the Indian Army became a distant dream and he worked towards studying medicine, but his love for the olive green uniform remained throughout his life. He

like his father joined the prestigious King George's Medical College (KGMC), Lucknow in 1953 and passed MBBS in 1958 and MS in General Surgery in 1961. He had the privilege to learn the basic art and science of surgery from legendary surgeons including Prof. S C Misra and Prof. R V Singh. He joined the department of Surgery at KGMC in 1963 as Lecturer in Surgery, later rose to be its Head and retired in 1996.

Training in Oncology

He had a keen interest in the speciality of oncology from the beginning, but incurred experience in various surgical disciplines, which helped him later in his oncology practice. In the early 1970's, his mother developed oral cancer and this was a turning point in his professional path. At that time, cancer care in India was practically non-existent. His mother's suffering crystallised his resolve to develop oncology services in India, particularly for the poor. In 1972 he was awarded Karnofsky Fellowship at St. Jude's Hospital in USA. During his fellowship at St. Jude's Hospital he learnt molecular biology, cancer chemotherapy and intricacies of multidisciplinary treatment of cancer, which proved to be a most rewarding experience. Impressed by his work, he was offered a faculty position and a tenure appointment at St. Jude's Hospital by his mentor and Director Dr. Donald Pinkel. Dr. Misra turned down the appointment and decided to comeback to serve his alma mater and to be a teacher and to translate his rich experience in cancer research to larger benefit of his fellow countrymen, specially the poor masses, than to live in absolute materialistic comfort in USA. He was awarded UICC fellowship and also received training at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, USA.

S. Misra
Department of Surgical Oncology, CSM Medical University
(formerly King George's Medical University),
Lucknow 226003, UP, India

S. Misra (✉)
122, Faizabad Road,
Lucknow 226007, UP, India
e-mail: misralko@gmail.com

Development of Oncology and Indian Association of Surgical Oncology

His tenure in the USA lit a spark and stirred him to translate his vision into reality. He worked relentlessly in establishing an Oncology unit in the Department of Surgery at KGMC for the care of the suffering cancer patients. The Oncology Unit was one of the first units in a Medical College in India dedicated to cancer treatment. He worked tirelessly in establishing the Oncology division as a center of excellence for cancer treatment. He was invariably the first to arrive at the hospital in the morning and the last to leave in the evening, or even late at night! He headed the unit for the next two decades. Due to his hard work and inspiration the Oncology division was upgraded to Department of Surgical Oncology in 1998. The Department of Surgical Oncology became the first center in North India to impart MCh in Surgical Oncology. He nurtured the growth of other super specialties at KGMC and was also responsible for creation of departments of Urology, Paediatric Surgery and Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery. All these departments are recognised by the Medical Council of India for imparting MCh degrees.

Dr. Misra was a central figure in the creation of the Indian Association of Surgical Oncology (IASO) in 1976 as a subspecialty of Association of Surgeons of India. He was the first Editor of the Newsletter of the IASO and always dreamt of for a journal of IASO. He later became its Secretary and President. There was no conference of IASO that he did not attend and inspired generations of surgeons to take up Oncology as a speciality and join the IASO. The IASO has grown from few members to over 800 members with its own journal with the efforts of stalwarts like him.

Dr. N C Misra

As Teacher, Clinician and Role Model

He always believed in teaching the young surgeons, encouraging them in the right direction, developing their research perspectives, scientific thinking and driving them hard to be worthy surgeons and clinicians in coming times. He used to say, “Young minds are very impressionable and fertile and if properly driven towards research, they pick up faster and that’s how a better new generation evolves”. He taught generations of students the art and science of surgery, the concept of multimodality treatment and above all human values. He was such a wonderful and knowledgeable teacher that his impact on his students cannot be gauged or expressed in words. He was examiner for MCh in Surgical Oncology and as well as DM in Medical Oncology at different institutions, and was firm but humane with each of his students. Above all, he was a great motivator—he encouraged all around him—be it his students, his colleagues, or his family, to push their limits—to always aim higher, to believe in excelling, and to achieve new heights. I remember so vividly him saying, “impossible only means i m possible!”

He was a clinician par excellence and taught this to the students. He was a ‘doctor of the poor’ and only one visit to his office anytime around the year was needed to substantiate this statement. He had a tremendous ability for documentation of case histories of cancer patients and spent hours documenting every detail of treatment. By his deeds and mannerisms he was a role model for all.

Community, Social Service and Special Traits

Although scientific research, academic and clinical commitments were compelling enough but he always had time for community work. He made significant contributions to mass health education, cancer detection, screening and prevention programmes. He would organise these programmes in the remotest of areas of the state. He would buy medicines for cancer patients in the hospital on his own so that no poor or needy went without treatment.

He had a phenomenal memory for names and faces. If he would meet someone once, he would always remember him years later by his name. He was honest with his patients, students and family. He had a remarkable feature in his manner to build up interpersonal relationship with his patients, peers, colleagues and students. For his students he was a father figure and went out of his way to see that no harm came to them.

Dr. Misra was a family man. He married Dr. Prem Kumari Misra (nee Sial) who was two years his junior, after an extended courtship. It was an inter-religion marriage in the early sixties—she from a Sikh family and he from an orthodox

Brahmin family. A true romantic at heart, he would never miss an opportunity in supporting, and complimenting his wife on her academic achievements and excellence. Yet instead of claiming credit, he always said, “that she was the main driving force for all his achievements”. (Dr. P K Misra was former Professor and Head of Department of Paediatrics and Principal and Dean of KGMC. She is also recipient of Dr BC Roy National Award).

Awards and Recognition

He worked throughout at KGMC and became the Head of the Department of Surgery in 1994 and retired in 1996. He was given an extension for 2 years due to his National and International stature. Dr. Misra had been recipient of the highest medical honours and awards. He received the Dr. B C Roy National award (1986) and Silver Jubilee Research Award of Medical Council of India (1997). Besides this he was recipient of 24 National and International awards. A few notable are ICMR Sandoz Cancer Research Award (1985), Sir Shri Ram Memorial Oration of National Academy of Medical Sciences, Sir Dorabji Tata Oration Award of Indian Society of Oncology, and Col. Pandlai Oration Award of Association of Surgeons of India. He was awarded Fellowship of Royal College of Surgeons of Glasgow, and was Fellow of American College of Surgeons, International College of Surgeons and National Academy of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. He was Honorary Consultant to Army Medical Corps and Cromwell Hospital, London. He had the unique distinction of being the President of Indian Association of Surgical Oncology, Indian Association of Cancer Chemotherapists (currently Indian Association of Medical and Paediatric Oncology) and Indian Society of Oncology. He was sole signatory from India on Paris Charter—Global Crusade Against Cancer, Member Steering Committee of

National Cancer Registry Programme of ICMR and member teaching faculty of UICC, Geneva. He published over 156 scientific papers in National and International journals. The Association of Surgeons of India published his biography in their book “Extraordinary Surgeons of Ordinary People” and the IASO has an oration in his name.

His Last Years

He developed chronic renal failure but still continued to be involved in teaching, research and patient care. He would come from his dialysis exhausted but would spend his remaining time seeing patients. He always kept the suffering of others much above his and worked till the end to decrease it. He left for his heavenly abode on 15th September 2006. He is survived by his wife Dr. P K Misra and children Dr. Sanjeev Misra and daughter Mrs. Sumita Misra, a senior IAS officer in Haryana.

He taught all of us that there is no short cut to success and hard work, and that honesty, humility and harmony should adorn each doctor. He loved his patients and students irrespective of their caste, creed, colour and religion. He was a true karmayogi, for whom the selfless service of mankind was the ultimate worship of God. Dr Misra will always be remembered with love and respect by the medical fraternity, his students, patients, friends and relatives for his humane behavior, unparalleled virtues and invaluable contributions to medicine and society. As his juniors, the greatest tribute we can pay him is to follow his ideals—as bold visionaries in life, as meticulous researchers at work, as compassionate and knowledgeable doctors with our patients, and as honest and hardworking humans in the world. Our world today needs more human beings like him.