A Tribute to Dr RS Rao

(1935–2011)

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Published online: 7 September 2012
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It is an honor to be given the opportunity to write this Tribute for Dr R S Rao former Director and Head Department of Surgery at the Tata Memorial Hospital. He was a man I truly admired for not only being a through professional, but more importantly for being a great human being. I am eternally grateful to him for it was Dr Rao who gave me an opening at Tatas when I first came to Mumbai looking to pursue a career in surgical oncology. I was his student for my Masters and ironically followed a similar career path to hold the positions of Director Tata Memorial Hospital and Chief Head Neck Services, the two positions that he held when he superannuated from the institution. Not once in all these years did he ever make me feel obligated for this but was a constant source of inspiration. As I sat to pen these few lines I asked people who knew Dr Rao what I should write about him. There was unanimity amongst all in saying that he was a fine doctor, good human being, full of integrity and inherently honest. As one of his nephews said at the prayer meeting in

his memory he did it all with a fantastic sense of humor—with great affection, a warm smile, and a twinkle in his eye.

To me that was Dr Rao in a nutshell. He inspired many as a doctor, mentor, teacher and he touched the lives of so many of his students and patients. I was surely one of them.

His Early Years

Raja S. Rao was born into a cultured and educated family on the 18th of November, 1935 in Bahruch, Gujarat. He spent his early childhood in Ajmer, Rajasthan, and in 1947 his family relocated to Bombay. Dr. Rao's father was an accomplished engineer who served the Indian Railways. He was responsible for planning the Churchgate Station and Badhwar Park—two iconic constructions that are admired to this day in South Mumbai. His father placed great emphasis on education and the values of integrity and service. As a result, all six children were highly educated and achieved success in their respective fields.

Dr. Raja Rao did his primary schooling at the South Indian Education Society School (SIES), and subsequently attended Ruia College Matunga. While many of his family members were engineers, Dr. Rao opted to pursue a career in medicine. Endowed with amiable disposition, compassion, and being a bright student he seemed ideally suited for this field. He studied medicine at Seth G.S. Medical College with distinction. It was here that he met Sunanda his charming wife to be.

Tenure at Tatas

Dr. Rao joined Tata Memorial Hospital in 1957 as a resident and was appointed assistant surgeon in 1963. He rose through the ranks to become Chief Head Neck Surgeon,

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Chief Department of Surgery, Medical Superintendent and then Director of Tata Memorial Hospital. He was a very well reputed surgeon, and was particularly known for his skills in thyroid and parotid surgery. He was different from many surgeons of his time in more ways than one. As a young post graduate I remember him as being a safe surgeon where the patient came before surgical flamboyance. He was an extremely compassionate person and treated countless patients, both rich and poor, with equal love and care. There was total harmony in his unit with good understanding between all staff. His assistants and residents had true admiration for him. Although he wore dual hats as administrator and surgeon each patient would be seen daily without fail on evening rounds irrespective of how late it was or how heavy the day had been. He authored numerous publications and papers many in high impact journals, including a monograph on thyroid cancer that is still referenced today. Although a head neck surgeon he was accomplished in all aspects of surgical oncology and had an equal number of publications in both head and neck and non head neck journals. He was very approachable and respected as a good and fair administrator. Anyone could walk into his office and Dr. Rao would give the person a patient hearing.

It was his vision that initiated the Dept of Preventive Oncology at TMH which is one of the feathers in the cap on our institution today.

Distinctions

In recognition of his service as an oncologist he was appointed as a consultant to the Armed Forces (INS Ashwini), the Railways, and the Governor of Maharashtra. He served as president of the Indian Society of Oncology and the Indian Society of Surgical Oncology. He was also Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer of the Indian Section of the International College of Surgeons and various time points. Over the course of his long career, Dr. Rao earned many awards and accolades at the national and international level, including felicitations by Former Prime Minister Vajpayee and Former President APJ Kalam, FESTA award for his contribution to endocrine surgery, Sushrut award of Mumbai medical foundation, Dr. DJ. Jussawalla award, SIES Society award for prominent ex alumni of SIES school and a certificate of appreciation from the UICC.

Mentorship

Over the years, Dr. Rao mentored several youngsters as a MS postgraduate teacher and in helping them shape a career in surgical oncology. I was fortunate to be one of them. He had this unique ability to provide guidance and wisdom in a

humorous way. He was popular with his students with whom he continued to maintain a strong bond and provide guidance years after they had left Tatas. Many of his students rose to positions of distinction in the country—Dr K.S. Gopinath, Dr Prabhakaran, Dr Sandeep Madhwapathy, Dr Ravi Kalghatgi to name a few. Whenever we met at national conferences there seemed to be a bond amongst us all in that we were Dr Rao's students even though we were years apart in our training and not at Tatas at the same time.

Personal Life

Dr. Rao was a caring and devoted husband to his wife Sunanda a senior gynecologist and the first consultant at the preventive oncology department at Tatas. The two complemented each other perfectly and were the proverbial—made for each other couple. His son Satish is a surgical oncologist as well and just as his father has maintained utmost integrity in professional practice.

He was a deeply spiritual person. In recent years, he studied with great interest the commentaries by various saints and philosophers on religion and the scriptures. In particular, he studied the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita in depth, and recently authored and published a book of his thoughts and interpretations of this great treatise. His spiritual inquiry continued even through his illness, as he was studying and compiling his notes on several of the Upanishads.

A fact not known to many about Dr Rao was his generous nature and his help for those who had not. In the words of Mr Anand Chalke his peon who still works with me at the office—he was quick to help poor patients, staff and students who came to his office and were in need of financial help. Dr Rao funded the textbooks of two deserving medical students up to post graduation and fees and books of two other deserving students through graduation. This he did from his own savings as he lay great emphasis on education and felt that no one should be deprived of it for lack of money. He also donated money generously and regularly to NGOs and trusts which he felt were doing genuine service to humanity.

His Last Days

Dr. Rao was diagnosed to have multiple myeloma in an advanced stage. Having spent his entire professional life in a cancer hospital he was well aware of the overall prognosis and accepted the diagnosis stoically as only he could. He told doctors that he would go ahead with the treatment so long as it did not cause side effects and affect his quality of life. He fought this battle bravely for four years after the

diagnosis. He continued to carry out all his day to day activities till the very end. To those of us who met him during this time he was always his usual self—composed and at peace with the happenings around. It was difficult to see a man who walked the very same hospital corridors with his huge unit in tow now on a hospital bed with the writing on the wall. While we tried our best to suggest various newer treatments, he was very clear about his choice & opted for only supportive care. He passed away peacefully

on 30th September 2011 with his close family members around.

Once in a while, we have the good fortune to meet and know someone who is truly an exception. Dr. Raja Rao was such an exceptional individual. True to his name he was a real King (Raja). In his naturally unassuming way, he showed us all a code of life to live by. Though we all deeply mourn his loss, let us remember his exemplary life and loving spirit.