The New INASL President: Physician-Scientist par Excellence

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Prof Rakesh Aggarwal took over as the President of the Indian National Association for the Study of Liver (INASL) in August 2018. He is a multi-talented person with work not only in Clinical Hepatology and Gastroenterology, but also in health economics, vaccination, research methodology, journal editing, scientific communication, etc. He is an excellent researcher and educator, who encourages pupils to think beyond the obvious.

I first met Rakesh in 1994 – much after I had already become familiar with his handwriting. In those pre-internet days, while reviewing manuscripts for the Indian Journal of Gastroenterology, we would make comments on hard copies. It amazed me to see him almost rewriting manuscripts—fitting entire sentences in his small handwriting in the margins of A4 sheets—to make these acceptable for publication. Once we met, we soon established a good rapport, and have had several opportunities to work together.

At school, Rakesh was interested in mathematics and physics. He believes that it was his father's bronchial asthma that led him to choose medicine. He received his graduate and postgraduate training in Internal Medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi. The stay at AIIMS changed him from a timid boy into a man who uninhibitedly speaks his mind, and also found him his life partner Amita. In 1987, they moved to Chandigarh, where he received his Gastroenterology training leading to a DM degree.

In July 1990, he joined the Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences (SGPGI), Lucknow. This brought him in touch with Prof Subhash R. Naik, who then headed the department there, beginning a superb

mentor-mentee relationship. Following in Prof Naik's footsteps, he set forth on a journey into gastroenterology and areas beyond, such as research methodology, epidemiology, laboratory work, writing, editing, etc. Soon after his arrival in Lucknow, there was a large epidemic of viral hepatitis in Kanpur. He and his mentor dived headlong into it, demonstrating that it was caused by hepatitis E virus (HEV). This work got him an award at the plenary session of the Annual conference of the Indian Society of Gastroenterology in 1991. A publication in the *Lancet* about this epidemic and a few other papers followed, and soon the HEV had him hooked.

He then went to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Atlanta to learn laboratory techniques. On return, he published several research papers on different aspects of HEV infection. Today, he is one of the most renowned persons internationally in the area of HEV. Besides research papers, he has contributed to major textbooks, including to the Schiff's Textbook and Oxford Textbook of Hepatology in the past, and to several editions of the Sleisenger and Fordtran's *Gastrointestinal Disease*.

He has worked on clinical, epidemiologic and laboratory aspects of several other diseases. In early 2000s, he used a health economics model to show that universal infant hepatitis B immunization would be more cost-effective than selective immunization of infants born to mothers with HBV infection—a work that influenced government policy. More recently, he used mathematical modelling to show that treatment of HCV infection with direct-acting anti-viral agents is cost-saving, in countries where generics are available, contributing to WHO's recommendation to treat all persons with HCV infection.

His work has brought him several accolades. He is a fellow of all the three national science academies. He has received several awards from the Indian Council of

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Medical Research, and Department of Biotechnology. He has been a member of the WHO's expert groups on hepatitis B and hepatitis E vaccines, and HCV treatment guidelines. He is a member of the Scientific and Technical Advisory Group on Viral Hepatitis of the WHO, and is also a member of the prestigious Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization of the WHO.

During our work together for the Indian Journal of Gastroenterology, I have found him to be a balanced critic of scientific papers—not only for medical content but also study design and statistical analysis. We also worked together to design the first website for the Journal, long before many Indian Journals had online presence. After completing his term as the Editor of that journal in 2012, he has been an Editor of the Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology.

What sets Rakesh apart is his passion for teaching. He is ever ready to impart knowledge not only in Gastroenterology but also in epidemiology, research methodology, statistics and medical writing. Whenever he visits Mumbai, I invite him to interact with our residents. Soon, they are engrossed in discussion over a clinical case, interspersed with laboratory techniques, principles of clinical decision making, and ethical issues, etc.

For this piece, I asked Rakesh to name a few individuals who have influenced him. These to him were: his father—who taught him to always fearlessly speak what he believed in; several teachers at AIIMS (in particular Prof JS Guleria, head of the Department of Medicine there when Rakesh was an MD resident)—who encouraged questions and taught 'irreverence' (not to respect a person merely because s/he is senior); Prof Subhash Naik—who

treated him as an equal colleague and took pride in his growth, sometimes even leaving Dr Naik behind; Dr Kris Krawczynski at CDC—for the opportunity to learn laboratory work; and some friends (in particular Prof Philip Abraham from Mumbai and Dr Peush Sahni, AIIMS, New Delhi), whose selfless conduct and actions he has tried to emulate.

His wife, Amita, is a Professor of Clinical Immunology and Rheumatology at the SGPGI, and shares several of his values and passions—including the love for teaching. Their daughter, Arushi, and son-in-law, Srikrishna are both computer engineers in Seattle, USA.

Unknown to some, Rakesh has an extremely good sense of humor—making fun of situations and hardly ever of people. His qualities include warmth, sincere concern and unparalleled honesty—not only in research but also in his dealings with others. He is a perfectionist and drives himself hard. Of course, he expects the same honesty and hard work from colleagues. Overall, Rakesh is a tough nut to crack; but like a coconut—hard only on the outside.

In my opinion, the INASL is fortunate to have Prof Rakesh Aggarwal as its President for the next two years. During this period, the Association will be in the capable hands of a truly remarkable and talented individual.

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