Obituary

Dr. Ambrose James Selvapandian

Professor Ambrose James Selvapandian (1923-2011)

Dr. Ambrose James Selvapandian, Dr. AJS for short, was born within a large well-educated family from the extreme south of Tamil Nadu. He graduated from Government Stanley Medical College, Chennai and completed his post graduation in general surgery. It was his tryst with destiny that he joined the Department of Surgery at the Christian Medical College Hospital, Vellore, in 1951. Around that time, the medical world was agog with the new phenomenon in CMC Hospital, Vellore, where the dedicated Dr. Paul Wilson Brand was pioneering surgical reconstruction and rehabilitation of the leprosy disabled patients. This immensely impressed Dr. AJS and brought about a reappraisal of his own career and calling. Giving expression to his uncanny observations and innate skills, he began devoting his time to the correction of diverse deformities of neglected trauma, residual paralysis of poliomyelitis and rampant infections of that time and added to these the correction of deformities caused by the enigmatic *Lepra bacillus* (Hansen's disease). Dr. AJS's commitment to orthopedic surgery and leprosy reconstructive surgery was wholly established in the early 1960s. He rose to the onerous task as Professor and Head of the Department of Orthopedics and Leprosy Reconstructive surgery at CMC Hospital, Vellore, in 1966 when Dr. Paul Brand left CMC, Vellore, to pursue rehabilitation at the National Hansen Disease Centre, Carville, Louisiana, USA.

REMARKABLE CHARACTERISTICS

Dr. AJS was rapidly identified by contemporaries and his

staff as a person endowed with remarkable characteristics like being intent on simplifying orthopedic surgical procedures as expected of a good leader, maneuvering surgical equipment deftly and precisely as befitting a surgeon artist, respecting and delicately handling tissues in the surgical field that attracted aspiring young surgeons to orthopedics and reconstructive surgery, and demystifying the complex medical jargon as down-to-earth clinicians mostly do. He enjoyed performing a meticulous Hippocrates (clinical assessment) on patients, sometimes to the point of questioning the need to requisition expensive and time-consuming investigations. Implants were used by him to the barest minimum, and in some cases, he set aside universally accepted implants and yet provided cure or restored the patient to normalcy. His extraordinary ability to weigh up the benefits of conservative care versus invasive care or blend them sequentially was greatly respected and unquestioned by his contemporaries and staff. Much later, he candidly mentioned to this author that his aim was to fine tune clinical judgment with the appropriate intervention so that the treatment given to the patient does not adversely impact his/her future well-being. I considered this a truly noble trait for orthopedic surgeons to follow in a field like ours that is relentlessly flooded with exotic biomaterials and paraphernalia that promise perennial perfection.

PERSONIFICATION OF HOLISTIC CARE

He worked long hours in the hospital, as he was convinced that it was the best way of staying in touch with patients and being readily available. Dr. AJS greatly valued every patient's autonomy and practiced the ethics of nonmaleficence and beneficence. He personified "holistic" care even in those days when the term was not that familiar. Students, trainees and associates held him in awe at CMC, Vellore, and so were it in other universities and centers that he visited. Examination going orthopedic postgraduates in institutions far and near yearned for Dr. AJS to come as one of the examiner quartet because it was no secret that if he did come, there would hardly be any casualty in the exam.

PIONEER IN ORTHOPEDIC SURGICAL PRACTICE

In his varied general orthopedic surgical practice alluded to earlier, he achieved deformity correction, joint stabilization

and eradication of intractable infection with great aplomb. In leprosy reconstruction, Claw hand and Foot drop correction were his favourites.

He pioneered the “Mobile Surgical Programme” wherein reconstructive surgery and simplified modalities of physiotherapy were rendered willingly and free of charge to thousands of polio and leprosy disabled individuals at centers in remote areas. This in effect was the beginning of Rural Orthopedics in India, the credit for which should be given to him who is the one that pioneered this practice. He accomplished this by making periodic trips with a jubilant and eager team of young surgeons and a therapist by train or an old Volkswagen van to far off and nearby centers, respectively. These lively sojourns lasted between 2 and 5 days. He was passionate in demonstrating workhorse reconstructive procedures to young surgeons in order to quicken the correction of a legion of severely deformed patients that remained in the society. This author asserts that Dr. AJS was one among the few authentic do-good surgeons in the country who was largely responsible for bringing down the deformity rates of the leprosy disabled.

AN AFFABLE INDIVIDUAL

He chose the right moment to amuse associates and PGs with an anecdote that carried depth and meaning or said something in a lighter vein at the most opportune time to diffuse a piquant or tense situation. You could detect easily that he was in control and yet accomplished it in a subdued manner. For example, if he saw an OPD or ward deficient of junior medical staff, his one-line musing will be something like: “these young surgeons have no business to fall sick”! He was a devout Christian who kept the faith but never once preached from a stage or delivered a sermon from a church pulpit. He turned down many administrative positions in the institution because he felt that it may divert his focus on patient care. The only exceptions were his acceptance of a committee membership of the Diocese or Church after much persuasion because he was an esteemed arbitrator and peacemaker who settled contentious issues. He remained physically fit even as he grew in age. I and others remember seeing him demonstrate a “sirsasana” for a few minutes to hundreds of medical students at a staff entertainment function as he was nearing superannuation in CMC, Vellore. He endorsed the doctrine of yoga and practiced it regularly.

HIGH OFFICES HELD IN THE CENTRAL AND STATE CHAPTER ORTHOPEDIC ASSOCIATIONS

Dr. AJS promoted the various dimensions of orthopedics

and served the associations in many capacities over the years. He had been the following:

- Founder Member of the Indian Orthopaedic Association.
- Vice President of the Indian Orthopaedic Association (IOA).
- President of the Tamil Nadu Orthopaedic Association (TNOA).
- The TNOA: Dr. A. J. Selvapandian Orthopaedic Fellowship was instituted in his honor in the year 1995–96.
- He received the Lifetime Achievement award from the OASIS at the OASISCON conducted at Cochin in 2010.
- He was the founder President of the Indian Society for Surgery of the Hand (ISSH) (1977).

RECIPIENT OF NATIONAL AWARD AND WHO SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBER

He was the recipient of the B. C. Roy National award and several other awards. He was a member of many subcommittees of the World Health Organization (WHO) and was appointed by WHO (1970) to visit institutions in India to teach, demonstrate surgery and promote rehabilitation. He was a member of a DGHS Working group on Poliomyelitis deformity correction. Many honors and responsibilities in the medical arena in the country rested lightly on his shoulders. He personified dedication in the posts he held.

He authored several scientific papers and chapters in text books and made contributions on Leprosy reconstruction and Hand surgery besides post poliomyelitis deformity surgery.

FINALE

Dr. AJS was an excellent example of a man whose appearance harmoniously matched his character – he wore very ordinary attire to the hospital throughout his career which reflected his astute and simple reasoning given with a broad smile. He had considerable tolerance, which in part stemmed from being the father of four daughters. He and his wife educated all of their daughters to become doctors. However, they pursued disciplines of medicine quite different from their father’s. The daughter’s and their children survive him now.

Essentially, Dr. AJS’s medical practice revolved on his competence, character and compassion. The hallmarks of his career were his maturity, balance and equanimity. To dozens of postgraduates, he was a conscientious Guru who influenced their orthopedic practice and the one who left

his kind of philosophy for them to adopt or modify while leading their lives outside of orthopedic surgical practice.

The IOA and TNOA have lost a remarkable surgeon and a leading light who remained a role model even after retirement from CMC, Vellore, where he served for 31 continuous years. Dr. AJS's enduring legacy is compassionate care to all patients, whatever their station in life; effective reconstructive surgery for the disabled; patience, skill, and common sense approach to even the most complex problem; and generosity and concern for students and staff. Dr. AJS ran his race well while looking toward the mark of the High calling, and there is laid up for him in Eternity the reward for his untiring service to orthopedics.

May his soul rest in eternal peace!

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