

O B I T U A R Y

Burjor Nusserwanji Colabawalla

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The Times of India, Mumbai, recently published the following obituary note:

Dr Burjor Nusserwanji Colabawalla, husband of late Mehroo, father of Khorshed and Kershaw, father-in-law of Ruiynton and Vanessa, grandfather of Fram, Friya and Mitali passed away peacefully on 23 September 2002 after a long illness borne with courage and dignity. Cremation: Chandanwadi on the morning of 25 September.

Many memories flashed through my mind as I digested this information. Let me share some of them with you.

I had the privilege of being Dr. Colabawalla's house-surgeon at the St. George's Hospital, Bombay for six months in 1962. The hospital catered to the poor and Dr. Colabawalla was the consultant urologist to them. Dr. Colabawalla impressed me with his concern for every patient under his care and the long hours he spent in the hospital each day. He was never in a hurry, concentrated entirely on the patients under his care whilst he was in the hospital and knew exactly what was happening to each of them at all times.

St. George's was then considered merely a service hospital. In it, he conducted several novel studies. He enrolled Dr. Phiroze E. Billimoria, the outstanding radiologist in Bombay at that time, and did arteriographic studies on patients with diseased kidneys and high blood pressure. You will realise the significance of this work when you learn that no other hospital in Bombay could then do such studies and that the tests were done free of cost to the patients, Dr. Billimoria absorbing the damages. The contrast studies in diseases of the epididymis and vas deferens is another example of their pioneering research.

Especially relevant to this journal is his sterling character and strong sense of ethics. The following anecdote, narrated by Dr. Vijay Dave, another of my teachers, will give you an inkling of Dr. Colabawalla's passionate nature. As Dr. Dave entered Ben Nevis (the building where Dr. Colabawalla lived and saw patients), he was startled by a middle-aged person with flying hair running out and away as though in fear of his life with Dr. Colabawalla in hot pursuit, features contorted by anger. Realising that the chase was futile, Dr. Colabawalla returned to Ben Nevis. He stopped as he saw Dr. Dave. Since an explanation was obviously in order, he panted: "Sorry about this, Vijay. That bloody doctor had the nerve! He asked me for a share of my fees for seeing the patient he brought for consultation!!"

Generations of resident doctors at the Grant Medical College and Sir J. J. Group of Hospitals (of which St. George's was one) will long recall the help and support he and his colleagues at Ben Nevis gave them whenever they had to confront the authorities in government in protest against wrongs done to

them. Dr. Colabawalla's forte was the careful study of regulations and the subsequent evolution of battle strategy against those in power supporting each claim and accusation with unchallengeable data and references to relevant rules. When told that such actions would not make him popular with the powers-that-be, he snorted, as he puffed his pipe, "I'm not out to win a popularity poll, nor do I want anything from them for myself. Let us fight for what is right." It is to his credit that he fought many such battles and was undaunted by the occasional failure.

His principal concern during the last decade or so of his life was the right of the individual Indian to die with dignity. Mr. Minoo Masani, impressed by similar movements abroad, founded a Society to champion this cause and found a ready, willing and able ally in Dr. Colabawalla. After Mr. Masani's demise, Dr. Colabawalla headed the Society and spent much of his time and energy for this cause. The deprivation of all rights of the terminally ill patient, the indignity of lying helpless with tubes inserted into or emerging from every imaginable and unimaginable bodily orifice and blood vessel, impersonal and extremely expensive 'intensive care' and the disconnection of the dying person from all those near and dear was anathema to him. It was right of every Indian, he felt, to decide how and where he wished to die and he did his best to foster law to ensure that every citizen was given this legal guarantee. He was quick to point out that his was not an advocacy for mercy-killing or the taking away of a life but also maintained that it was up to the individual to make the final decisions when in the grip of a terminal and often very painful illness. Society was duty bound to honour such a decision.

He was an ardent supporter of this journal and readily obliged whenever called upon to write for it, comment on a paper or offer advice.

Always forthright and never one to mince words or dance in circles around a topic, Dr. Colabawalla was not without his critics but those who knew the man admired him. For me, personally, he was teacher, guide, liberal benefactor and role model. It is not often that one comes across persons cast in the same mould as his. And that is a pity!