

BOOK REVIEW

Adapting to the ebb and flow of life

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Dr Ratna Magotra, *Whispers of the HEART — Not Just a Surgeon*, Konark Publishers Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 328 Pages, Rs 800 (Hardcover), ISBN 978-81-963629-0-4

Dr Ratna Magotra was Professor and Head of Cardiothoracic Surgery at the King Edward Memorial (KEM) Hospital and Seth Gordhandas Sundardas (GS) Medical College, Mumbai. She is also one of the early women cardiothoracic surgeons from India. This interesting book is the story of her life as told by herself, on the persuasion of her friends and well-wishers.

The book is organised into seven parts, each covering a facet of her life, with the initial four parts covering her journey from Jammu to her professional life in Mumbai and other places. The last three parts deal with her life outside of her profession and include her travels, her work in non-governmental organisations and charity work, and her association with some well-known personalities. An appropriate philosophical quote precedes each section.

She traces her story from her early upbringing in a small town of Jammu in a middle-class family which had seen more affluence earlier, a victim of the upheavals of the partition of India and the mass migration of a large population. The milieu in which she grew up provided her the platform to follow a career in Surgery and the especially demanding, for that era, field of cardiothoracic surgery. This period probably shaped her thoughts about the socioeconomic aspects of society. She fondly describes, in some detail, her serendipitous meeting with a Delhi couple in Kashmir, and their help during her medical studies in New Delhi.

The narrative moves to New Delhi where she did her undergraduate medical studies at the prestigious Lady Hardinge Medical College, now Sucheta Kripalani Hospital. Like most doctors, she has fond memories of her

undergraduate studies and the life of that time. She could have pursued her postgraduate training at her alma mater but she chose to go to Mumbai, the then epicentre for the surgical field in India, for surgical training and that move probably directed her towards cardiothoracic surgery.

In Mumbai, she worked initially as a House Officer at The Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hospital, usually catering to working class patients, and later at the Northcote Nursing Home where well-known doctors of Mumbai treated the elite. Here, she was mentored by Dr Kersi Dastur, a pioneer cardiothoracic surgeon of India and this probably inspired her to become a cardiothoracic surgeon. At this stage, she was still looking for General Surgical training, and managed to get it at the Nair Hospital, Mumbai, preceded by an exploratory visit to the USA. There is just a hint of sadness as she failed in her first attempt at the MS examination, maybe due to inter collegiate rivalry, and she raises the issue of intellectual corruption in academic circles, hoping against hope that with the advent of the All-India admission system the situation may improve.

She describes her training period in cardiothoracic surgery at the Nair Hospital with great fondness and her interactions with her teachers especially Dr Dastur and visiting eminent cardiothoracic surgeons, which helped her develop as a surgeon. She was appointed on the teaching faculty at Nair Hospital, the culmination of one phase of her life. During this phase, she trained abroad at Guy's Hospital London.

Soon an opportunity arose for her to move to the prestigious KEM Hospital as a Professor and Head of the department. She has described in great detail the bureaucratic hurdles and obstacles she faced in making this change, but without any bitterness or malice. What is sad is the amount of power bureaucrats have over the medical system. Her KEM period covered a brief interlude at the Texas Heart Institute, which she enjoyed.

During the latter part of her tenure at the KEM Hospital, she involved herself in the public health aspect of cardiothoracic surgery and in NGO work. Inspired by the cardiac transplant pioneer Dr Richard Lower, she took early retirement from KEM, partly "to exit the system resistant to change" and mainly to devote herself to public health, inspired and mentored by the eminent plastic surgeon, Dr Noshir Antia.

She has described her experiences with some societal issues like the Mumbai bomb blasts, Mumbai floods, the anti-

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To cite: Rao SR. Adapting to the ebb and flow of life. *Indian J Med Ethics*. Published online first on November 7, 2024. DOI: 10.20529/IJME.2024.073

Manuscript Editor: Sanjay A Pai

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corruption movement of Anna Hazare and the Covid pandemic. She has also vividly described her travel experiences in India. The last part of the book is devoted to her interactions with some notable people who influenced, and at times, mentored her and the inspiration she drew from them.

One factual error that I found (not of any consequence to the narrative) is on page number 272 where she mentions Rameshwaram as one of the four mutts established by Adi Shankaracharya. This is actually at Sringeri in Karnataka.

Dr Magotra had some hesitation in writing this book as she thought her life was “ordinary” and, not worth writing about. The book has captured the story of her life through her perspective, which is interesting and simple. She need not have doubted herself.

There is no bitterness, nor a victim mentality, gossip or playing the “gender” card in this book. Even the obstacles she faced in getting the coveted position at the KEM Hospital is described in a matter-of-fact tone, without malice or bitterness. This itself

is, in my opinion, a positive aspect of the book and offers a lesson to be learned.

Dr Magotra comes across as a person who takes the ebb and flow of life in her stride, without expectations while traveling a relatively uncharted course. Her Odyssey reminds me of a philosophical line from a Hindi film song by Sahir Ludhianvi — “*Main zindagi ka saath nibhata chala gaya*” (I faithfully followed the experiences offered by Life).

There is a clamour for increasing the intake of medical students, to increase the number of doctors. But it is conveniently forgotten that teachers are required to teach the art and science of medicine as well as instil in the minds of budding doctors the philosophy of ethical medical practice. Dr Magotra seems to be a teacher capable of doing both. This book will be useful in shaping the minds of young trainees.

Whispers of the Heart should interest cardiothoracic surgeons and other members of the medical fraternity, budding doctors and even lay readers. All may imbibe some of the author’s experiences to enrich themselves.