

OBITUARY

Dr Sunil Krishnalal Pandya (1940-2024) — a Humane Human

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With the passing away of Dr Sunil Krishnalal Pandya an era has come to an end. We have lost someone who was Medical Ethics personified, an astute clinician, a dexterous neurosurgeon, an ardent historian, a philosopher who stood high above worldly gains and fame. He lived as a well-wisher of his patients, friends, family, and mankind in general.

Initially, I saw him as an academician who was a genuine peer of the writings that Dr Manu Kothari and I collaborated on. He was dedicated, determined, disciplined, diligent and devoted to his work. He was very methodical and organised in his work. His interest in the history of medicine was unsurpassed. He kept students enthralled year after year for over three decades with fascinating stories on the history of anatomy and medicine in general, which included the theft of bodies from the graveyard. In 1993, when serial bomb blasts shook Mumbai, his talk was going on. Nobody paid any attention to the sound of the blasts, dismissing the noise as the bursting of crackers. We realised the gravity of the situation only when a messenger from the dean's office asked us to stop and go home. And, that lecture was completed subsequently.

The archives, Janus, pride of our institution, established in 1993, is the brainchild of Dr Sunil Pandya. It houses old instruments, relics of the past such as the first ECG machine which came to India on which Gandhiji's ECG was recorded. He preserved the neurosurgery instruments of Dr Ginde. Current residents cannot recognise those instruments. He selected and preserved very carefully the old library books of the 18th century, which had outlived their lives as per the library requirements. Since 1993, when the archive was set up, until today, he has donated his personal books to enrich the

collection of the archives and humanities. The last lot reached the institution on the day of his passing.

He was unanimously selected as chairperson of the Dr Manu V L Kothari Chair and Division of Medical Humanities when it was founded on January 23, 2016, in memory of Dr Manu Kothari. He accepted the position because he was a very close friend of Dr Kothari. This was one of the first divisions of Medical Humanities in India. He shaped it and gave it structure. The division carried out various multifaceted programmes. The aim was to sensitise students and inculcate human values, to make them more humane while practising the art of medicine, balancing it with the knowledge of science and technology. He shouldered all the responsibilities of guiding students and staff in the design and execution of all the programmes, keeping proper records. The programmes included the conference "Ascension", an annual event which is totally organised by students. He paved the way for the publication of the annual report of the Chair and Division, as well as for bringing out the publication of the annual series titled "Reflections" which highlights varied perspectives of medical humanities. He relinquished this post after 8 years in April 2024, because of his failing health.

His contribution as the chairperson of the division remains unparalleled. He had vision. He guided the students and staff how to go about their work. Though he did not visit the institution physically he worked daily a couple of hours on medical humanities. He collected enormous quantities of material on medical humanities and built a rich collection of the same. This entire selfless work was done without accepting any honorarium.

I have known him since 1970, when I joined the department of Anatomy as a postgraduate student. I remained associated with Dr Pandya from 1970 until his passing. Being dear friends of Dr Kothari, we met regularly either in his office or our office. There used to be a feast of intellectual discussion on medical books, medical ethics, medical history, and on medical philosophy. Each one supported the other in their trying times. He stood by Dr Manu Kothari and me in various capacities — as a friend, philosopher and guide, a colleague, and critic of our medical writings. He encouraged us in our lateral thinking in medicine, acting as a true peer. Personally, he came to my rescue after the sudden passing of Dr Manu Kothari. He encouraged me and spent an enormous amount of time in completing and publishing our seven books and, the new editions of four of

our books. He also helped me in writing medical articles for international journals.

Narasinh Mehta has very poignantly described in his bhajan *Vaishnav Jan to Tenere Kahiye*, Gandhiji's ideals of the characteristics of a true Vaishnav, a man who lives truly like a humane human, practising all the values. Dr Sunil Pandya, a noble soul, lived his life like a true Vaishnav — a thorough gentleman. He treated everyone as an equal and was ever humble. He was non-ambiguous, transparent, and honest in his conduct. He carried out all his responsibilities and worked selflessly without expecting any worldly returns. He was truly a *karmayogi*. He was always the first to shoulder any responsibilities and the last in the queue for sharing credit. He was not touched by worldly wealth and fame. He worked tirelessly as a surgeon. He dedicated his life to his passion — the history of medicine. His life was a sterling example of medical ethics. He has given back in ample measure to all the institutions where he studied and worked. He wrote a book

on the history of the Grant Medical College. He has written a lot about the history of Seth G S Medical College and KEM Hospital. Hopefully, it will come out as a book.

Dr Pandya believed he was an atheist. In conclusion, I am reminded of an episode from *The Keys of the Kingdom* by A J Cronin in which a character, Father Chisholm, tells his friend, a non-believer, that although he may not believe in God, God did believe in him.

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