

In My Living Memory

by

**Gulzar Mufti MBBS, MS, MCh, FRCS
Medical Director, Care UK,**

**Consultant Urological Surgeon
Spire Alexandra Hospital, Kent,**

**Fitness To Practise Panellist General Medical Council UK
&
IRM Reviewer, The Royal College of Surgeons of England.**

**Formerly:
Consultant Urological Surgeon &
Medical Director
Medway Maritime Hospital, Gillingham, Kent, England.**

E-mail: grmufti@aol.com

Tel: +44-980574949

“Take care of your memories, for you cannot relive them.”
(Bob Dylan)

Prelude

14th July 1959 was a date with destiny for many of us. Like little Mugli the man-cub in front of the mighty Sher Khan in Walt Disney classic *The Jungle Book*, there I was – dressed in a newly stitched and neatly ironed, pink poplin shirt, crouched in a low chair, directly in the line of sustained and stern stare of Dr Fazal Rehman, the surgical maestro of that era and father of modern surgery in Kashmir. After a short, sharp but searching interview by him and his fellow panellist, the polite and polished Col SL Gargey, Advisor to Jammu & Kashmir Govt. for Medical College, a few weeks later, amidst family jubilation the letter of my admission to the newly commissioned Srinagar Medical College finally arrived. **(Fig 1)**

The selection of candidates was strictly merit based and on Monday, 31 August 1959 I along with about sixty other boys and girls from different backgrounds and cultures – the first batch of students of the College trickled past the arched gate of what used to be the old hospital near Amira Kadal, which in its glory days was known as the Saddar Hospital and/or Maharaja’s Hospital, exactly where Lal Ded Hospital stands today.

Preclinical Years

We assembled in neatly kept lawns of the old hospital and were greeted by two colonels: the Advisor, Col. Gargey and the first College Principal, Col. GVS Murthy. Like Gargey, Murthy was also a retired army physician from South India, but the two were poles apart in personality. Gargey was older and slower – like a father figure, soft, smiley and caring; Murthy was taller and broad shouldered, brusque in style, brisk and bouncy in step.

Like young cubs reared in different habitats and bundled into a pack for a circus, we were herded into the newly constructed lecture theatre, introduced to our teachers and given an overview of what to expect. We were told to get two white coats stitched for Anatomy dissections. Nervousness admixed with a pinch of excitement overwhelmed everyone. New people, new environment and fear of the unknown – this was a new world for us all – even for the staff who had been hired to teach. **(Fig 2)**

Half of the students came from the valley and were day scholars, many of them including the author had been raised in congested alleyways of Srinagar within its seven bridges. Those who came from outside the valley were accommodated in the nearby purpose-built hostel; most of them were from Jammu Province and there was one representation from Ladakh. Over the next few days we had a few additions from the rest of India. Eventually the final number stretched to sixty-six.

A number of senior teachers had been hired from India. Professor BS Kahali, Head of Physiology was knowledgeable but past the sell by date. A good denture would have made him comprehensible since each word from his mouth splashed like a bubble and spread like a tidal wave. The word *curve* sounded as *cow*, *zygote* as *jygote*, and *zero* as *jeero*. Prof KK Bhatt, Head of Anatomy was a good Anatomist, had a naughty smile and a weird sense of humour. His teaching methodology was haphazard. A South Indian gentleman with a deeply resonant accent by the name of Professor KK

Iyer replaced him. Iyer was a scholarly tutor and an expert Anatomist; his Embryology lectures were a treat. Dr Dasgupta was a straightjacketed teacher who made Biochemistry an easy science – his analogy of building blocks and saccharides was explanation par excellence.

Months passed and more staff arrived from the plains, in particular, the tongue twister Dr Tandon and the short-necked Dr Kumar who taught Physiology and Anatomy respectively. Local doctors were also recruited into junior posts; Dr Brij Mohan Bhan as a Lecturer in Anatomy, Dr ML Kaul and Dr AN Safaya, and Dr GM Shah as demonstrators in Anatomy and Physiology respectively. After some years they all became Heads of their respective departments. I remember with sadness the other Anatomy demonstrator – the young and handsome Haroon Rashid. Elegant mannerism and etiquette, polished bicycle and neatly creased trousers were his trademarks. He was one of the passengers on the ill-fated air crash in 1965.

From the Anatomy dissection hall on the ground floor River Jehlum greeted us every morning. Its view was gorgeous and relaxing, even though it had lost its importance as the main transport conduit. The main vehicles of transport in Srinagar were the bicycle and the *tonga*. Buying a bicycle was a big investment for a parent. Day scholars who could not ride or afford a bicycle would use their legs or a *tonga*. One came to the College in a private *tonga*.

As our sensors got used to strong smell of formalin, cryptic *quizzes* of *Kahali* and undulating temperaments of our teachers, we started knowing one another better. There were sporting events – indoor and outdoor. Ball games, field and track, individual and team events were played, which culminated in the Sports Day celebration at Polo-ground Srinagar. There was prize distribution at the College Day function that was preceded by a cultural programme – hilarious dramas, singing and music – Bollywood as well as folk. The pseudonym *Nalpat Salpalati Taawan* given to a character in one of plays twists my tongue even today. It is extraordinary though that within such a small community there were singers, musicians, sportsmen and women, actors and actresses, and intellectuals of extraordinary ability.

As the year rolled over the second batch arrived which gave us the proud title of *seniors*. Ragging of new entrants was the highlight of that week. Witnessing the scenes, in particular the *medical salute* made us realize how lucky we had been to be in the first batch.

After two glorious preclinical years it was time to change our abode and say good-bye to the old hospital and the river nearby. We had our share of disappointments too – one of our mates abandoned the pack to meet the creator, another sneaked through the ceasefire line and emigrated.

The Transition

While we were learning human Anatomy and Physiology, two miles down the road contractors were busily uprooting pretty orchards and gardens around SMHS Hospital Srinagar and erecting buildings to create space for the Medical College and for us – the first batch of third year medical students. The reigning Prime Minister performed the inauguration ceremony of the College on 25 August 1961. (**Fig 3**) Sri Maharaja Hari Singh (SMHS) Hospital was designated as its teaching hospital and Col.

Murthi's managerial remit was extended to include the Hospital. That arrangement continues even today.

With the move from cadaveric Anatomy Hall to live clinical arena at the SMHS our life was about to change, and so was that of the SMHS. Before our arrival the hospital was split into four zones: Medicine, Surgery, Eye & ENT, and Gynaecology & Obstetrics.

The Medicine Section (wards 3, 5, 6, 7, 8) was the domain of two excellent UK trained physicians, the astute Dr Ali Jan Fazili & and the vibrant Dr Syed Naseer Ahmed Shah. Two UK trained surgeons, Dr Ghulam Rasool and Dr Girdhari Lal Kaul known within the hospital circles as *Lassa Bubb* and *Gira Kak* ruled the surgical sector (wards 15, 16, 17, 18, 19). I had the privilege of working for both; Ghulam Rasool was up-to-date, innovative and a fast operator and a pious man with a heart of gold. Girdhari Lal was more like Sir Launcelot Spratt of 'the Doctor Series' films – a man larger than life, a classical general surgeon who could tackle anything surgical. The Eye and ENT Department (wards 1, 2, 4) was the realm of the genteel Dr Harbajan Singh and his junior associates Dr Ghulam Nabi Kozgar and Dr Pran Nath. Dr Shanti Malhotra headed the Gynaecology & Obstetrics service (wards 9, 10, 11, 12) She was unassuming and simple but a fast operator. Many female Assistant Surgeons helped her manage a large workload.

The transition of SMHS from a service hospital to a teaching hospital was well planned. New teachers had been recruited from India well before our arrival and they appeared on the scene at the same time as us. They were introduced to us in an open forum. It is beyond the scope of this article to mention each one of them but the main players in non-clinical areas included: Dr P Dutta, Assistant Professor of Pathology (who was later joined by Prof Goel) Mrs S Sannan Assistant Professor of Pharmacology (who was later joined by Prof Gujral) and SN Ahluwalia Professor of Social & Preventive Medicine (SPM).

Senior appointments in clinical disciplines included: R C Khanna Professor & Head, & N L Parmanick Professor of Surgery, O P Thaman Professor of Paediatrics, SR Verma Professor of Medicine and M L Gupta Professor of Orthopaedics. An Indian Army Colonel Professor Saligram Kaul, a Kashmiri by birth, was appointed as Head of Medicine. Junior appointments from outside the State included amongst others, Dr S Arora, in Obstetrics & Gynaecology, Dr KS Ahmed in Medicine and Dr Sannan in Surgery.

The territories controlled by senior clinicians already working at SMHS were reduced drastically as the cake was divided into smaller parts but all the sitting tenants were appointed to senior faculty positions as Associate Professors. Some like Dr Brij Mohan Bhan and Dr RN Sharma started as Assistant Professors. Three locals namely: Dr Shanti Malhotra (Obs & Gyn), Dr Harbajan Singh (Eye & ENT) and Dr Chaman Lal (Anaesthetics) were made Heads of their respective Departments.

Life In The Clinical Lane

We had now moved into the world of real Medicine, learning about health and sickness – its causation, prevention and treatment – in the classroom and at the bedside. The landscape was different – dynamic, fast paced and alive. People even

started calling us *Doctor Saheb*. The syllabus was extensive – many subjects, numerous lectures and tutorials, and regular clinics reciprocated by countless quizzes and tests. We were the first clutch of chicks being raised on a brand new farm and all of us – teachers and students alike – were on a learning path. Compared to the current era of investigative medicine where a laboratory test or an imaging tool makes a diagnosis, those days the emphasis was on learning from the patient, usually by the bedside – by interrogation and clinical examination. It took us a while to learn how to correctly elicit small ascites, the correct way of demonstrating fluctuation in a scrotal mass, for the auditory vesicles to differentiate mitral regurgitation from aortic incompetence and so on. The sequence of inspection, palpation, percussion and auscultation became a conditioned reflex.

While lectures like those of Datta in pathology, Gujral in pharmacology and Khanna in Surgery were not to be missed, those by Ahluwalia in SPM were a source of amusement. His discourse on Malaria Eradication Programme lasted for about one year; each lecture would start by attacking the Malarial Parasite, and the whole class would explode with the battle cry of *attack*.

Various sports and recreational activities continued regardless, as more batches followed us and as we became senior citizens of the territory. The Maternity Duty Room in the consultants' corridor at SMHS became a venue for tittle-tattle and card games. Dramas and recreation programmes were staged at Tagore Hall Srinagar regularly, and a bigger drama was played in public when students and staff went on strike and demanded the ouster of Murthi. After many days the Govt. gave in and M L Gujral succeeded as Principal.

During our clinical years, a number of state subjects returned to take up vacant faculty positions. In our final year two young UK trained ladies, Dr Jahan Aara Naqshbandi and Dr Girja Dhar joined as Assistant Professors in Gynaecology & Obstetrics, and Dr Farooq Ashai started as Assistant Professor in Orthopaedics. All of them had a huge impact on subsequent development of their respective specialties in the Valley. Soon after, a UK trained physician Dr Ghulam Qadir Allaqaband joined the Department of Medicine. He had an important role in healthcare affairs of the State in later years. The steady stream of locals continued thereafter, and within a few years after our graduation the entire faculty were State Subjects.

Over The Years

After spending five magnificent years together we metamorphosed from young chicks to young adults and graduated as doctors. As we left our mother hen – our College, like a handful of seeds the winds of destiny scattered us in different directions all over the globe. But reminiscences of those years will remain nascent and alive, as long as the doors to our memory banks remain open. My recent walk through the College and SMHS corridors overwhelmed me with the realisation that after more than fifty years the playing fields are still the same – only the players have changed. Even the car used by the Principal is the same brand as then, i.e. the Ambassador – the Indian version of Morris Oxford. The difference is that the first Principal's car was bright red in colour and the occupant was perennially fiery but the current incumbent's car is white and complements his temperament.
