



In Memorium

This sun will never set: Remembering Dr Sunil K Pandya

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Dr SK Pandya
in 2016
at the University of
Chicago Centre in
Delhi

We established our 'Medical (now Health) Humanities Group' at UCMS Delhi in 2009, marking our first steps into the nascent field of medical humanities in India. Dr. P. Ravi Shankar had piloted a humanities module at KIST Medical College in Lalitpur, Nepal, and had created a Google group in 2011 that included module participants, faculty, and like-minded individuals. In my quest to learn more, I joined the group. This is where

I had my first virtual interaction with Dr. Sunil Pandya. Later, I also joined the KEM Medical Humanities Google Group to benefit from his wisdom.

When we launched this journal in 2014, Dr. Pandya responded to a call for papers and sent us one of our first articles.[1] He graciously accepted our request to join the editorial board as National Advisor, and

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later wrote an ethics perspective piece that was a commentary on a reflective student narrative titled 'Looking Deeper'.^[2] The commentary bore his trademark learner-affirmative and patient-centered stamp. He wrote:

"The patient was under two stresses – that of illness and that of missing her son. Under such circumstances, having a medical professional display sympathy and genuine interest in helping her in more than one way must have touched her deeply."^[3]

We finally met in person on January 27, 2015, in Chennai, at a Wellcome Trust meeting on humanities. I was in awe of his down-to-earth and humble personality. Our first conversation revolved around a

documentary on hydrocephalus and the attitudinal barriers that individuals with disabilities face from society. That meeting sparked a chain of personalized email communications that I greatly valued.

Dr. Pandya's wisdom spanned many topics. He once asked, "Have you seen the film My Left Foot?", and then went on to point out how Emperor Claudius was an example of someone with cerebral palsy. We also exchanged ideas on the harmful narrative of "overcoming disability". He shared his skepticism about unproven medical interventions like the use of stem cells for brain and spinal cord disorders, and raised ethical questions about controversial surgeries, such as Dr. Scoville's destructive lobotomy on his wife.^[4]



The author, Dr Singh,
with Dr Pandya
in 2015
at a Wellcome Trust
meeting in Chennai

What I learned from him, I tried to propagate. Last year, I introduced our physiology postgraduates to his work. During an open-book test, I encouraged them to use AI tools, ChatGPT, books, and other resources to analyze ethical issues surrounding the story of Henry Gustav Molaison (or Patient H.M.). It's worth noting that ChatGPT failed to identify Dr Pandya's seminal article published on the topic.^[4] To me this reaffirms Dr Pandya's belief in the power of human endeavor as opposed to

taking the easy way out and relying on artificial intelligence.

Dr. Pandya's legacy extends to his role as the founder of Indian Journal of Medical Ethics (IJME), a journal rooted in exposing corruption and championing ethics in medicine. A scathing piece I wrote in 2018 on the Medical Council of India's discriminatory guidelines for students with disabilities was not accepted by another journal that had approached me for an

invited commentary, but IJME published it on merit.[5] Six years later, the paper has been quoted by the Supreme Court of India in the landmark Om Rathod vs. DGHS 2024 judgment, demonstrating the journal's enduring ethos.[6]

Beyond academia, Dr. Pandya touched lives with his writings. His 'Letters from Mumbai' for the National Medical Journal of India, and his insightful 'Piece of My Mind' articles introduced us to extraordinary individuals, innovative ideas, and profound questions. One such concept, "Medicine's Most Important Teachers,"[7] deeply resonated with me and inspired our 'lived experiences session' for first year medical students where members of both the

disability and the transgender communities shared their lived experiences - not as patients, but as experts of their own lives.[8]

In 2016, alongside my colleagues, Dr Navjeevan Singh and Dr Upreet Dhaliwal, we collaborated with the University of Chicago and offered a conference to health professionals showcasing the use of the humanities to promote all-round development of caregivers. Dr Pandya was one of our erudite speakers and he encouraged participants to explore different ways of learning to get to the patient's story.

He paid keen attention to the theatre games and exercises that were a part of the



Dr Navjeevan Singh with Dr Pandya in 2016 discussing Theatre of the Oppressed



Dr Upreet Dhaliwal, and the author, Dr Singh, felicitating Dr Pandya in 2016 at the University of Chicago Centre in Delhi

conference, and later wrote about his experiences witnessing Theatre of the Oppressed as it unfolded in front of him:

“The goal was constant. How can we restore dignity to the oppressed and help them obtain what was rightly due to them without their having to bow and scrape? What can each of us do to reach this goal?”[9]

In another article about this form of theatre, he wrote:

“The example of the outpatient clinic where everyone from the junior resident to the chief of the clinical unit treats an illiterate and poor woman with disdain and abruptness was poignantly enacted. Requests...to devise and implement ways by which the unjust, insensitive and the uncouth could be frustrated or, even better, converted to humanitarian action led to much constructive thought and, at times,

yielded remarkable solutions.”[10]

His desire to learn and his commitment to change and evolve was very evident during our interactions, and is greatly inspiring.

Our association continued when he invited me to Ascension-2018, a medical student' conference on medical humanities, where he guided discussions as the Dr. Manu V.L Kothari Chair of Medical Humanities at KEM Hospital.

As we grieve his passing, we celebrate a life lived with purpose and a legacy that inspires us to uphold the ideals he cherished. Dr. Pandya's parting words to me resonate deeply: “Wish you more power to your already formidable elbows!”

In his memory, may we continue to push boundaries, champion ethics, and embrace the transformative power of humanities in medicine.

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