

## Obituary



Suresh Tambwekar

### Suresh Tambwekar: A personal tribute

And a host of others were distressed to hear of the passing away of Suresh Tambwekar. Most of us were aware of his failing health, but somehow as it often happens with people we love, we expect them to go on forever.

I have known Suresh for the last 55 years right from our student days. Though we never worked in the same department, we trained under the same teacher, one of the pioneers of plastic surgery in this country Professor Charles Pinto. Suresh was at the King Edward Memorial Hospital and I at the Bai Jerbai Wadia Hospital for children in Bombay. We met at seminars, ward rounds, and operating sessions at each other's institutions. After this close interaction in our formative years, we did not meet again till the late 1990's. During these years the impression I carried of him was of a man who was very earnest about his work, a man with a sharp inquiring mind, friendly, with a quaint sense of humour and a above all a passionate desire to help individuals and take a leading role in organising events. Even in those days he was always a pathfinder, venturing and leading others into new areas of interest.

Suresh stayed on in Bombay, while I moved to the Mission hospital in Trichur. From the time to time, I was pleased to hear from common friends in Bombay about how Suresh had gone to England trained with Braithwaite and was steadily rising to prominence in the plastic surgical hierarchy of the country.

I think that it was in 1998 that for some reason that I did not recollect Suresh visited Trichur and contacted me. I remember that it was a Sunday. We spent time reminiscing about the old days. He asked to go round my department, and we spent a better part of the day in the ward discussing cases and mainly talking clefts, which was our common interest. He was quite surprised to see the range of plastic surgical work that was in the wards. I was a complete non-entity in those days. It was my good friend Suresh who pushed me, partly against my will onto

the national and international stage. He invited me to deliver the keynote address at a major international cleft conference that he organised at the Bombay Hospital in 1999. It was a bold thing for him to do, and it was rather bold of me to accept. He then launched the Indian Society of Cleft Lip, Palate and Cranio Facial anomalies, and insisted that I become its first president. When he became the President of the Association of Plastic Surgeons of India, he gave me the prestigious Sushruta oration. Today if it was not for Suresh Tambwekar I would have remained a non-entity doing my work in the backwaters of Kerala.

You must wonder as to why I mention all these very personal details. It is because I want you to get the measure of this man, who had the indomitable courage and unbridled enthusiasm for what he believed in. The man who had the vision to found and nurture the Indian society of Cleft lip Palate and Cranio Facial Anomalies which would not have come into being without the work and personal sacrifice he put into it. He whipped up concern for a much neglected and forgotten deformity that pre-dominantly affected the poor and projected it as a sub super specialty. Even in Suresh's declining years his enthusiasm for causes he believed in never flagged.

When he founded the cleft society, he saw to it that he brought under one banner, plastic surgeons, maxillofacial surgeons, orthodontists, speech pathologists, and anaesthetists. By this, he stressed that the plastic surgeon was no longer a virtuoso but was dependent on other specialties for comprehensive cleft care. Almost in tandem Smile Train came to India. He had the foresight to support this organisation and through the India Society of Cleft Lip and Palate he gave Smile Train a solid base to take off from. The whole cleft scenario in the country changed as the result of this one man's effort.

Cleft and cranio facial surgery was not his only field of interest. He furthered the cause of other subspecialties,

set up a training centre for microvascular surgery and contributed in depth to the treatment of the diabetic foot.

Suresh had the eye to see and the generosity to recognize the merit in young men, utilised them for the projects that he propagated and at the same time he furthered their careers.

Living lions are remembered and honoured dead ones are often forgotten too soon. Let this man be fondly remembered for all that he did for the profession, the people he loved and the causes that he so strongly believed in. Plastic surgery in India is richer for his presence.

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