Dr. Madhusudan Mohanlal Desai

VR Joshi*, VB Poojary**

Dr. M. M. Desai was born in Surat, Gujarat, on 10th June 1919. His father, Shri Mohanlal Desai was an eminent lawyer and a corporator of Bombay (Mumbai) Municipal Corporation for many years; his mother Viravati was a homemaker. Dr. Desai studied at Elphinstone school and Elphinstone College, Mumbai, before joining Seth G. S. Medical College, Mumbai. The decision to study medicine was made by his father (as was the case with careers of his three brothers also). On obtaining MBBS and MD degrees, Dr. Desai proceeded to England and obtained MRCP, London. He then spent one year at a New York hospital, USA. He was a trained acupuncturist.

Dr. Desai joined Nair Hospital, Mumbai in the year 1952 as an assistant Honorary and rose to become an Honorary Physician. He was in fact a cardiologist who became interested in rheumatic diseases. Realising the need for a separate department to treat patients with rheumatic diseases, he along with Dr. Gaitonde, orthopaedic surgeon at Nair Hospital, initiated the process. The permission to start the Department of Rheumatic and Collagen diseases was granted in 1959. The two conducted a combined clinic. It was the very first rheumatology clinic of its kind in India. It provided medical, orthopaedic, physiotherapy, and occupational therapy services.

Dr. Desai was actively involved in the growth and spread of rheumatology as a specialty. He was an active member of national and international organisations and contributed significantly to the growth of the speciality. His most important contribution was the founding of Indian Rheumatism Association (now Indian Rheumatology Association [IRA]) in the year 1964. He was its founding President. For him, IRA was his baby and he nurtured it with special interest. The first national conference of IRA was held in Mumbai in 1970; so also was the first conference of SEAPAL in 1968 (now APLAR). Both the conferences were organised by Dr. Desai. He was a leader with excellent organising skills. Dr. Desai held many prestigious positions. He was President of SEAPAL – (South East Asia Pacific League Against Rheumatism, now APLAR), member of the Executive Council of the International League Against Rheumatism (ILAR), member of the editorial board of ILAR Bulletin, member of the Advisory Committee of the WHO for rheumatic diseases and Vice President of the Association of Physicians of India. He was an elected Honorary member of Czechoslovak Rheumatism Society.

Dr. M. M. Desai was an excellent clinician. Hard working and amicable he was dedicated to his career, work, patients and teaching. He encouraged young doctors to take interest in rheumatology and had instituted a visiting fellowship programme in Rheumatology at Nair Hospital.

He contributed scientific papers to national and international medical journals and chapters to books.

Dr. Desai had a pleasant personality. He was a Sanskrit scholar, loved music, especially Western music (He was often invited to participate in radio programmes). He was a painter (KEM souvenir’s carried his paintings) with an abiding interest in photography. He was married to Kusum Amersey.

Dr. Desai died at Pune, of myocardial infarction on 29th July 1976. He is survived by his daughters, Kiran and Kanak. Mrs. Desai passed away in 2003.

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