



A Pioneer of Surgical Oncology in India—a Tribute to Dr Mrs Mehta

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Dr Mehroo Jal Mehta, “Mehta Madam,” as she was referred to affectionately by all who knew her, left for her heavenly abode on the 2nd of November 2018.

Born into a “Doctor” family of Dr N. J. Bandorwala, a well-known surgeon in Mumbai, and Dr Saroshbanoo, herself, one of the early pioneer women doctors of India, she excelled in studies. She completed her basic medical graduation from the Grant Medical college in Mumbai. After marriage to Dr Jal Minocher Mehta, she moved to Pune, where she had the distinction of being the first Masters student in Surgery of Pune University in 1952. She obtained a Rotary scholarship for advanced training in Kansas in the USA, so that she was equipped with the knowledge of the latest techniques of the time.

This training coupled with her direct fearless attitude ensured that she excelled in her role as faculty of Surgery in BJ Medical College, Pune, and she rose to the ranks of Professor and Head of Surgery early. This position she held with distinction for over 25 years, leaving her indelible stamp on the department. Even after retirement, she continued to serve as a surgical oncologist at the KEM Hospital in Pune.

Oncologic surgery in those days was very much the domain of the “heroic” surgeon, as specialities such as Radiation and Medical oncology were relatively less developed, and patients presented very late to the doctor. Most patients from Pune and surrounding areas, who would be earlier be

compelled to travel to Mumbai, to Tata Memorial Hospital, now had an alternative to go to. It would be fair to say that she was largely responsible for making Pune a preferred location for major oncologic surgery for patients from the region.

In the pioneering spirit of the times, she evolved many distinctive techniques of cancer surgery of the head and neck and esophagus, and as a mark of the respect among her peers, she was often invited to demonstrate these techniques in India and Abroad. She carried out all types of abdominal surgeries, but her main interest was esophageal cancer surgeries, head and neck cancer surgery and surgery for portal hypertension. She had performed more than 1500 esophageal cancer surgeries and more than 4000 head and neck cancer surgeries in her professional career, a testimony to her indefatigable stamina and grit! A prestigious guest oration in her honor was instituted by the Pune Surgical Society, and the senior author has had the distinction of being invited to deliver this oration in January 2016, a memory he cherishes as also her kind words, and encouragement for the first presentation of his fledgling career in 1976 where she was the chairperson.

Her husband Dr Jal Minocher Mehta who became a renowned leprosy surgeon, philanthropist, and social worker, and was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1982, had predeceased her. Her only son Minoo Mehta, a doctor and a friend of the author of this article, died tragically while in the pursuit of his passion of mountaineering, a loss she was unable to really reconcile with.

For legions of trainees, students, and postgraduates, she was a legend. Her students vouch for her exceptional clinical judgment, superb operative skills, and astute postoperative management. Stories of her bluntness, sharp wit, and quirks abound, yet she could be soft spoken and tactful when the need arose. Her compassionate attitude coupled with the fact that she was a lady, made her an iconic figure among patients. Mention must be made of her chain smoking habit, a distinctive feature of her personality, at that time a very bold behavior for a lady, though

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it may seem ironical today considering that she achieved reknown as an oncologist.

The legacy of her charming personality, work ethic, seminal academic contributions, and leadership from the front will continue to influence several generations of surgical oncolo-

gists who were trained by her and through them we hope that these values will be perpetuated forever.

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