

## Obituary



A tribute to the father of open heart surgery in India- Dr. N.Gopinath November 1922 to June 2007.

It was in July 1961 while I was in the Department of General Surgery as lecturer the news that dazzled the whole Christian Medical

College (CMC) campus- that Dr. Gopinath the Head of the Department of Thoracic Surgery performed the successful closure of a ventricular septal defect utilizing cardio pulmonary bypass for the first time in the country.

Dr. Gopinath was born to Nagarur Narayana Rao and Sundaramma in Bellary in the year 1922. After initial education in Bellary and then in Madras Christian College, Tambaram he joined the Madras Medical College graduating in 1942. Subsequently he joined the Army Medical Corps during World War II. He worked alongside Dr. Samuel Oram the well known cardiologist from UK and with Col. Leigh Collis the famous surgeon and was posted during that time in Lahore, Pune and Rangoon. On return he worked for sometime in the Arogyavaram Tuberculosis Sanatorium in Madanapalle in Chittor District bordering Vellore. In April 1951 he joined the CMC hospital in Vellore and worked as a trainee with a giant and legend of thoracic surgery- the world famous Dr. Reeve Hawkins Betts, (Dr. T. Thomas was a year (1950) senior to him). Dr. R.H. Betts along with a few surgeons like Drs. S.S.Anand, from Chandigarh, S.K. Sen, from Delhi, A.K. Basu, from Calcutta, P.K. Sen of Bombay founded for the first time in India the Thoracic Surgery Association of which Dr. Betts was its first founding president which was during the year 1954. By virtue of the excellent rapport Dr. Betts had with Dr. A.L. Mudaliar the then Vice – Chancellor of Madras University, he had no hurdles whatsoever in establishing what was for the first time in India, the higher specialty of MS (thoracic surgery) in CMCH Vellore. Three candidates Dr. Gopinath, Dr. T. Thomas and Dr. Geoffrey Allen appeared in March 1960 for the first examination in India. Dr. Betts bade farewell to CMCH in August 1960 at the end of 12 long and eventful years of service and Dr. Gopinath took over as head of a very prestigious department. I joined Dr. Gopinath in September 1961 and appeared for the examination, MS (thoracic surgery) in March 1964. Dr. Gopinath left Vellore in April 1964 to join All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) New delhi as chief of cardio thoracic surgery. While he was at Vellore the three years I had his tutelage, he taught me as well as

other colleagues that the motto one requires is 100% attention for 100% of the time to become an excellent cardio thoracic surgeon and which precept had stood me in great stead all along my life until this day. After the initial success with open heart surgery programme, he started a research lab for experiments on dogs. This was only to pave the road to establish the programme firmly. He got involved in about 20 to 25 of these experiments for which study I got associated myself utilizing the heart-lung machine for achieving long term survivals which during that point of time remained 2 or 3 days. The yeoman services rendered by this doyen Dr. Gopinath is simply exemplary. He along with his colleague Dr. Sujoy B. Roy the then chief of cardiology at AIIMS started a combined Cardiology and Cardiac surgery group in the association. He received many accolades and while at Vellore he was awarded the Rockefeller Foundation award in the year 1957 to work with a legend- Professor C.W.Lillehei at the university of Minnesota Hospitals in Minneapolis in USA.

He fondly reminisces his association though brief with Sir. Brian Barratt Boyes at Greenlane hospital in Auckland, New Zealand. Thanks to the personnel rapport he had with towering personalities in cardiac surgery across the globe such as Dr. Denton Cooley, Dr. Christian Bernard, Dr. Donald Ross he was able to invite some of these famous surgeons to Vellore and later at AIIMS New Delhi. He was very quick mentally and had a unique ability to recall details. I could see evidence of this while I worked at CMCH with him for 3 years between 1961 to 1964. The only regret I reckon was that it was only a short period of 3 years for me and not more. His philosophy of hard work instilled the culture of 24 hr work cycle in his students and which precept stood them, myself and the other trainees and colleagues in good stead. His involvement, service and the unalloyed dedication with several thousands of patients in Vellore and AIIMS in particular with various types of congenital, adult cardiac and various thoracic diseases was outstanding and remarkable and these patients owe a great deal of love, respect and gratitude. He contributed his wisdom knowledge and experience by being a prolific writer and contributed in both national and international journals.

His pioneering effort was rewarded with many honours notable ones being the Padmashree by the Government of India in 1974 when he served the AIIMS. The life time achievement award was bestowed on him in the year 2000 by the association of cardio vasculr and thoracic surgeons of India at the annual meeting in Mumbai.

He was a warm and affectionate personality very

endearing to his colleagues students and nurses alike who worked alongside. The list of his trainees include names such as some outstanding surgeons like Dr. P. Venugopal the Director incumbent of AIIMS, Dr. Girinath internationally famous as a coronary artery surgeon at Chennai, Dr. I.M. Rao the pediatric cardiac surgeon at Abu Dhabi in the middle east and Dr. Sampath Kumar the incumbent Chief of Department of CT Surgery, AIIMS and several other surgeons.

To quote Dr. Prasad Rao the past President of the Association "The surgeons who are tained by Dr. Gopinath and heading various departments in India find in him a pleasant combination of *Bheeshma Charya and Dronacharya*" The short time I had with him in my formative years I learnt from him that undivided attention and unswerving commitment in your work remain a *sine qua non* for a cardiac surgeon.

After retirement he took up an assignment at the Seetharam Bhartia Institute Hospital in New Delhi where he devoted himself mostly to research work. In the words Owen Wangensten. Dr. Gopinath will always be remembered as "*one of the surgical immortals*". On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 2007 he left the surly bonds of earth to join the hands of God after a fruitful life of 85 years. The Indian Association of cardio vascular and thoracic (CVT) surgeons offer heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family. Our hearts and prayers go out to his wife Rama, their daughter Latha, sons Madhu and Ashok and their family and all the 5 grand children. May his soul rest in peace. To Dr. Gopinath we say *adios*-we shall miss you.

**Stanley John**