

## Education between the Lines

Based on my experiences as an undergraduate student at UCMS, 2001-2006

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Amidst the usual chaos and stresses of Medical education, there was something very special about the atmosphere at UCMS; something subtle and abstract, yet delightful. I think it was the near total lack of pretence. Be it among students or between teachers and students. To date I cherish the bonds I made with some of my teachers.

And as I fish for experiences in the closet of memory, I realize once again and anew, how these teachers have helped shape me up as a person, and not just as a professional. Amazingly, at that time neither they nor I was aware of this process!

I felt the teaching at UCMS abounded in such abstract, life-enhancing experiences and am thankful to the MEU team for making me sit and recollect them!

In first year, there was a sense of sheer discipline and meticulousness inculcated by the Anatomy Department. Then, in Physiology, Dr. Sircar teaching us neurophysiology was unarguably one of the best educational experiences of my life! The way he would correlate neuro-electro-physiology with electronics and software principles was superb! I had always dreamt of a teaching process like this one; it was medical teaching at its rare best! Other than that his sheer energy and keenness to teach and explain, and his willingness to entertain questions was inspirational!

Dr. Neelima Shankar's sweetness and sophistication was like a breath of fresh air in our paperback lives. The Department of Physiology had prepared a song to the tune of "Dil Chahta hai, kabhie na beetein, college kay din." It was somewhat lost in the din of the party so Ma'am was kind enough to render it again in her next lecture. Oh my God! I would say it was surely among the most memorable moments at UCMS. I can never forget that gesture. Actually that was the beginning of my love for UCMS. We were physiology students; a few weeks thereafter we were happy physiology students!

In Biochemistry, Dr. Dinesh Puri was an affectionate, calming presence. He would walk around the corridors with his satisfied smile. On one such day he stopped me midway and asked "Avijit, do you know what is the role of 2-3 DPG in blood?" "Excuse me sir?" It took me a couple of moments to understand what was going on. Thereafter I had several discussions with him on topics

ranging from the complexities of molecules to the simplicity of life. He has been a major influence in my life. He is a picture of how a man can derive true contentment by doing what he loves to do, and with passionate devotion. Thank you Sir!

In Pathology, the air tight administration was awe inspiring. I was floored with the wide experience, knowledge and sheer persona of Dr. Nishi Madan! Her name alone could silence a hundred odd students. Few of my friends would believe if I told them she was rather kind and enjoyed a good conversation with curious students!

Dr. Navjeevan Singh's Hollywood hero personality, sense of humour and the welcome detours into culinary nuances were refreshing in the rote, retain and repeat routine of fifth semester. He would tell us the word roots of terms that were otherwise literally Greek and Latin for us. Like "The Indian-file" arrangement of cells and "Goblet cells".

Dr. KK Sharma ensured we understood pharmacology in a crystal clear way. I remember him telling us incredible jokes after the class was over! We laughed our hearts out and at the end of it he told us that the not quite vegetarian joke was actually meant to illustrate the phenomena of receptor fatigue! Who would forget a concept illustrated with a laugh riot!

It still heartens me to think that there could be as motherly a teacher as Dr. Iqbal Kaur. She had taken the onerous responsibility of ensuring there was a cultural life in college and did her best to support the Students' Union during Ripple! Organising Ripple-2004 was also hugely educative to say the least.

Dr. Ashwini with his dynamic (read dynamo-like) personality showed us that doctors need not be meek, line-treading, pure and proper idols of men. He actually spoke for half an hour once on how we should all have girlfriends, and how a weekend spent in town is a wasted one, and how he never ever does that. He said doctors tend to be dull people and how he has carefully ensured there aren't many of them in his circle. He introduced me to other patrons of classical music – in an effort to fine-tune my flute playing skills. My flute playing is still average but I took every bit of the remaining advice. Thanks a tonne Sir!!!

A certain senior of ours got a 'supplee' in Forensic Medicine. He arranged all the class notes from the toppers of his class and published them as a guide book. He passed later on and generations after generations of medical students have used that book to sail through the Forensic exam. I am one of them! Now that's what you call bouncing back!

In Ophthalmology, Dr. VP Gupta's lectures were exhilarating. The colour slides showing the surgical achievements were enough to inspire anyone to become a surgeon! Community medicine however was my favourite subject. Dr. Sanjay Chaturvedi's firm leftist view of the world gave me a new perspective that lasts till date. Unknowingly he taught us to see how the ruling class rules the

masses without the latter ever coming to know. He said the tyranny may not be physical or economic, but mental. He most earnestly urged the girls to not torture themselves in the name of dieting, or to go after fairness creams. "Fair is beautiful you say. Well, who decided that? Who decided that slim is beautiful and fat is not." Don't give in to the tyranny, was his refrain. To students chattering in class he would politely say. "Doctor-sahib, it is a free market economy. If you like the soap I'm selling, buy it. If you don't, walk out. Period. But don't create a ruckus at the shop!!" Wow! What an open minded view of things! It's amazing how a teacher of community medicine ends up laying the foundation of your economic sense. Thank you sir!

I share a tremendous rapport with Dr. AK Sharma till date. He was unforgiving and unapologetic in his pursuit of honest research, and dispassionate in his dissection of shoddy work. It is this dispassionate dissection of the truth from the confounding that lies at the heart of the scientific spirit. I learnt it from sir! I have met many a great scientist ever since and this eagle's eye for objectivity is the common link between them. So you see UC has it all!

If I were to mention the one sentence that made me the Doctor I am, it would be this one by Dr. Arun Gupta. I have quoted it a thousand times and continue to swear by it.

"The moment you face a patient, ask yourself - can I make a diagnosis based on the History alone – without touching the patient? After examining the patient again ask yourself - Can I diagnose without any investigation? Make a provisional diagnosis – and a few others. Commit yourself to them. Write them down in your notes. Then look at the investigation reports. Never start with the reports. Treat the patient not the reports."

These I think were the Gospel's words for any clinician. I follow them till date. Patients are often initially taken aback by my blunt refusal to look at the reports before the history and examination. Class after class he would repeat the same thing till it got strongly ingrained! Thank you Sir!

In Medicine, Dr. Dwivedi was picture of energy and enthusiasm. His attention to the patient as a whole, and the way his eyes would light up while talking of classic medicine, would subtly introduce us to the glory of medicine. I heard – and I only heard, so I may be wrong – to a student reaching his chamber 8 minutes late for a thesis related discussion he said, "Doctor-sahib, I had kept 10 minutes for you. Please say what you have to in 2 minutes and leave." A small anecdote but a big lesson in the importance of time management.

In paediatrics, Dr. Faridi, while teaching something else took a session on the art and science of "Counselling". I always knew that it was important but the impact that session had on my professional and even personal life was beyond words. He told us how to listen and to inspire trust. How to 'reflect the question' to elicit more information, how to be non judgmental to engender

openness, how to be compassionate to garner compliance. What sir taught us went way beyond Paediatrics.

The sheer knowledge and completeness of what Dr. Piyush Gupta taught us ensured no one would dare to miss even a single lecture of his. In orthopaedics, Dr. Aditya Agarwal once brought a patient to the Lecture theatre and told us about the surgery that saved his leg. That was the juice of teaching! I am sure no one who attended that class would ever forget it! His insistence on punctuality was memorable. To someone coming even five minutes late, he would say, "Sorry sonny, you're too early for the next lecture."

Dr. Anil Arora's lectures were phenomenal to say the least. During my Internship, I saw him affectionately caress a patient's forehead while on the rounds. The poor girl had been suffering for too long. In just a few seconds his eyes welled up. The pain he shared was visible in his eyes. Months of classes on ethical practice would not have the effect that these few seconds had on all who looked on.

Dr. Sudhir Kumar, though the senior-most would never 'walk' from bed to bed, he would '*stride*'! Just to see the way he walked would tell you- you have a life – live it! Don't crib. Live it! Whenever I see a Senior Resident refuse 'lowly' work as it 'belongs to the Junior Resident' I remember the Orthopedics and Surgery Consultants. Very often I came up on them doing dressings for patients – even when the Residents had left for Lunch!

In Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Dr. Vaid made teaching participative by encouraging all students who made seminars. The one I made on 'Caesarian section' went a longer way in inspiring me to learn the subject than a hundred passive lectures. As does the encouragement I continue to receive from her. That's right, she remembers it still!!

I think I learnt a thousand times more about the 'art and science' of medicine during my one year internship than in the preceding four and a half years. The crowning glory was the first three months in what was Surgery Unit I at that time. I could write another essay longer than this one about those three months alone. In short, that was teaching by example. Truly!

I remember being made to write an apology note that went thus: "Sir, I arrived five minutes late for duty today. I'm extremely sorry for this serious mistake. I shall not repeat it. I beg you to allow me to please continue the duty today!" I never felt bad because the faculty as well as the residents would reach at least half an hour before time. And stay on much longer after that. Here was a group of men and women doing their duty as if it was the best thing in the world. Their work was a mission; a passion; a challenge; a joy – but never just routine. Every patient was taken up as a challenge to practice the skill to perfection. Shortcomings were taken seriously and investigated

threadbare to be addressed. Everyone seemed so happy and excited about their work – it would often make you wonder.

I once heard a patient tell Dr. Mohit Joshi – “It still hurts, but I’m okay with it.” He retorted with unexpected force: “What do you mean you’re okay with it? I am not okay with it. The eight years of my education are a complete waste if you’re still in pain. Here, take this medicine and let me know if it still hurts.” Now, that’s what you call a lesson!

Before certain surgeries, Dr. Pradeep Saini, Senior Resident then, would hand me over his atlas of surgery and say, “Here, read this up, today I’ll teach you how to perform an open cholecystectomy.” I remember how I was taught that day! Total blood loss was exactly 11 drops! During 24 hr duties, the intern was the first one to be sent for dinner and to catch a short rest. Dr. Sujoy Neogi would never catch a wink of sleep on duty! They were all proud of their surgical skills. They never realized they were imparting invaluable lessons in teamwork and leadership!

I remember a violent psychiatric patient who would come from IHBAS for an empyema dressing. He would punch and bite you at the first opportunity. The smell could make 50 people faint at once – but not Dr. Neogi. I observed his face right through to find the remotest glimpse of a reaction to anything. When a punch came his way he would deftly duck and get back to the dressing and suturing. His behaviour not only engendered respect but to date serves as an example of dignity in the face of disgust, and dispassionate duty in the face of an impassioned patient.

Dr. Vivek Agarwal’s sense of humour and superlative confidence was glamorous to us. My friend discussed with him about his relative, a complicated surgical candidate, and asked worriedly at the end “Who can do such a surgery Sir?” He puffed up his chest and beat it, and said “Main karoonga!” with elan!

We were expected to write four-hourly notes for all ‘sick’ patients. Many a resident actually fell ill within a few weeks of such intensive work. But no one ever complained at the apparent excess. I wondered why no one ever ranted about it. One fine day I got my answer, and how!

It was a cold winter morning, a little before five AM. I was busy going from bed to bed measuring the inputs and outputs. And suddenly Dr. BK Jain appeared. I was shocked to see him that early. The Youth for Equality movement had been launched and the residents and interns had declared a flash strike. And here was my Head of the Department telling me “I have come here to takeover from you. Tell me the samples to be drawn, reports to be collected and dressings to be changed – I’ll do them!” It gives me goose bumps still, to even think about it. For as long as the strike lasted, the consultants did the intern duties.

And here's the icing on the cake. We joked among ourselves waiting to see what happens to the four-hourly notes. To our utter surprise, we found the notes had been put in every four hours in complete detail! It wasn't just a lesson in surgical practice, it was a character lesson.

Truth be told, amidst the chaos and the humdrum of the elaborate, effort-intensive medical education process, there silently went on an *effortless* 'parallel education' – far wider in scope, far deeper in meaning and far longer lasting in consequence. I consider it the real education. And though it is intricately intertwined with the twin processes of knowledge and skill teaching, it is seldom visible to the uninitiated. It's like the invisible river *Saraswati* that meets the famed *Ganga* and the *Yamuna* at the CONFLUENCE!