

*OBITUARY*

**Prof. Surendra Kumar Manchanda  
(1931-1998)**



The cruel hands of death impoverished the world of basic medical sciences on 21 July 1998 when they claimed one of its most luminous stars, Professor Surendra Kumar Manchanda. Professor Manchanda was born on 8 November 1931 at Lahore. After graduating in medicine from Jaipur, he joined All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in 1957. At AIIMS, he did his M.D. and Ph.D. in physiology. Except for short stints abroad, he stayed on at AIIMS till his superannuation in 1991. But he continued to be professionally active till the last day.

To his students, he was a teacher with a difference. He flaunted neither his knowledge nor his authority, letting the students learn in an atmosphere of freedom and discovery. He was an erudite friend always available to lend a helping hand, not an overbearing know-all demigod out to stifle curiosity and imagination. Highly knowledgeable, yet deeply conscious of his limitations, he was always open to discussion and change. It was this openness, combined with his insatiable curiosity that made him an excellent research worker. In his research career spanning nearly four decades, he concentrated his attention on neural control of cardiovascular and several other autonomic functions and on the neural basis of behaviour. But his interests were wide-ranging, and it was only lack of time which prevented him from addressing several interesting questions such as the physiology of consciousness adequately. He was extremely thorough and meticulous in whatever he did, and that naturally made him slow. He was a stickler for technical perfection, and never accepted an observation till he was sure of its reproducibility and validity. Because of this cautious attitude, he was never in a hurry to publish, and some of his work is still unpublished. He was slow but steady, and hence always a winner. He was a full Professor at AIIMS at forty, and Head of the Department at forty-two. That brought his administrative skills to the forefront. He went about the task with his characteristic seriousness of purpose. He studied several books on management, and applied the latest techniques to achieve harmony and efficiency in the department. Seeing him conduct a meeting was a pleasure as well as a learning experience, one of the latest in the line being the General Body Meeting of the Association of Physiologists and Pharmacologists of India (APPI) at Lucknow in December 1997, which he was invited to chair. Generous with appreciation, lavish with a pat on the back (both literally and figuratively), he was equally adept at expressing resentment without raising his voice.

Dr. S.K. Manchanda was the recipient of some of the most coveted awards available to medical scientists. A few significant ones among them were the Hari Om Ashram Award (1978), Major General S.L. Bhatia Oration (1980) and P.K. Anokhin Medal of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences (1981). He was one of the very few Indian scientists to be

nominated to the Executive Council of the International Union of Physiological Sciences. Although he stayed at AIIMS most of the time, he taught medical students also in Iraq, Canada, Japan and Malaysia as a Visiting Professor.

Anyone who came in contact with Dr. Manchanda for any length of time could not fail to be impressed by his charming manners. Polite to a fault, he had an unbeatable perfection of style. He could exchange pleasantries with impeccable grace in Punjabi, Hindi or Urdu, English or French. He was a graceful host, and always welcome as a guest, for he could inject life into any party. He had more than his share of the vicissitudes of life but never lost his balance. It was amazing how he could keep his cool under the most trying circumstances.

He had an intimate relationship with the APPI right since its inception, and with the Indian Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology (IJPP) since its first volume. He was the Executive Editor of IJPP from 1971 through 1982. During this period he raised the standard of the journal through his dedicated efforts and also got it indexed in the *Index Medicus*. He was one of the founder members of the Federation of Asian and Oceanian Physiological Societies (FAOPS) and the founder President of the Federation of Indian Physiological Societies (FIPS).

Dr. Manchanda was sometimes disturbed about the future of physiology. On one hand, it is getting overwhelmed by daughter disciplines such as biochemistry and biotechnology; and on the other, in medical schools physiology is facing a manpower crunch due to the reluctance of medical graduates to adopt it as a career. Nobody who has any acquaintance with medicine believes that a bleak future is what physiology deserves, or that such a future is inevitable. With his prophetic vision of the future, Dr. Manchanda believed that physiology not only can survive but even thrive if it breaks out of its traditional shell. He wanted physiology to venture out in two directions. First, he wanted physiology to have, what he called, "a public face". Physicians come in contact with the public largely to advise about illness. But there is a lot of useful advice which physiologists can give to the public about good health and prevention of illness. Dr. Manchanda initiated public lectures at AIIMS and was the professor-in-charge of the programme for several years. Many of these extremely popular lectures were delivered by physiologists and other basic medical scientists. Secondly, Dr. Manchanda wanted physiology departments to provide relevant services for investigation of patients. On this front, the autonomic functions laboratory in the department of physiology at AIIMS is a legacy of his vision and industry. Besides research, this laboratory conducts autonomic function tests on patients referred to it by clinicians.

Dr. Manchanda's chequered career came to an end on 21 July 1998 after a brief hospitalization. He had his first heart attack as an M.D. student. But by providing tender loving care to his heart, he managed to coax it to continue pumping for forty years. Meanwhile, during these forty years, he lived a full life, never using a weak heart as an excuse to quit. His zest for life and tireless spirit will continue to inspire many for years to come. May his soul rest in peace.