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Dr. Hema Purandare - The pioneer in the field of genetics in India

When I see Dr. Hema Purandare today, I feel immensely proud of her. She was my student at Nagpur medical college. One who had entered the field of medicine reluctantly, she has scaled many peaks and has struggled against all odds to sow the seeds of medical genetics in India.

Though her parents were well off, she could get along with anybody which proved to be an incredible virtue later in her life. After graduation she took to teaching (anatomy) at Grant Medical College, Mumbai to enable her to look after her family as well. I was the Dean of this college at that time and could witness her journey quite closely. She was first introduced to genetics as a subject then, which was a part of the curriculum at the time. Because it was not on her own syllabus, she had to study it first to better convey it to the pupils.

Accepting such challenges is like second nature to her and as she dived into the deep end of the subject, being an anatomist, it fascinated her, and she wondered how she herself was born normal.

Since there were hardly any facilities in India to study it further, not only did she self-sponsored her expeditions in pursuit of knowledge and had trained under the stalwarts like 'the father of medical genetics - Dr. Victor McKusick' at one of the first distinct division of medical genetics in the world, at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, (US), Dr. Raju Chaganti at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre, New York, (US) and the pioneer in IVF, Nobel Laureate Sir Robert Edwards at the world's first IVF Clinic, the Bourn Hall Clinic, Cambridge, (UK) but the journey has continued till date.

After getting acquainted with the fundamentals, despite many lucrative offers, she returned to India and wished to start an exclusive genetic service centre. Unfortunately, neither the government nor the private sector could appreciate the need of this upcoming field and as there was no cure as such to the genetic defects nobody supported her. While she was trying to gain a foothold, I advised her to start a clinic on her own so as not to lose her identity.

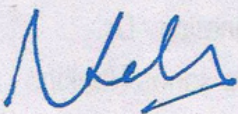
She took on this project singlehandedly and, without considering the commercial implications set out to deliver the best possible patient care under one roof. What enthralled me was her determination to make the latest genetic testing facilities available in India when almost no one was even aware of them. She collaborated with a few overseas labs for the most advanced genetic testing before they were introduced in India to improve patient care.

Since ours was a developing nation in the 80s, the technology was not so advanced. But the main concern she had was the absence of trained staff. To overcome this aspect, she trained bright science students to assist her in the lab.

The uphill battle got even tougher when her personal life suffered tremendous setbacks in the initial stage itself, but she never gave up and today this first private genetic service centre of India is providing state-of-the-art care to a large number of people in need, right from pre-marital and pre-conceptual stage to adulthood. She has recently teamed with an American company with the vision and purpose of continuing her wonderful work perpetually.

While establishing her practice she tried to sensitise her own fraternity and the public at large with her publications, talks, interviews, etc. She participated in many medical camps in the rural areas as well to identify high-risk cases and counsel the patients and spread awareness. Her teaching streak has continued and now she offers training in genetics to many bona fide students.

She founded ISPAT, an organisation with like-minded medical professionals, and tried to educate them regarding the birth defects of genetic and non-genetic origin which as she correctly says, are individually rare but collectively more, and though all are not treatable most of them are preventable.



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(Dr. Ramchandra Dattatraya Lele)