



IN MEMORIAM

Prof. Om Prakash Sharma, 1936–2012

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OM SHARMA: THE RENAISSANCE MAN, INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED SPECIALIST IN SARCOIDOSIS

A gentle giant of learning and inspiration peacefully passed away on August 19, 2012 at home in Los Angeles, at the age of 76 years. Om's academic accomplishments speak for themselves. But they don't convey the gleam that was always in his eye, nor his infectious smile. He only had positive things to say and was always encouraging. He was a great man, whose profound learning, humility and gentle approach to others will be a lifelong source of inspiration to those who knew him. The entire sarcoidosis community is mourning the passing of a true friend and academic teacher. For those of us lucky enough to know him, his passing is very sad news. For those of you who had not met him, you have missed a great opportunity. Om always spoke with a calm reassurance, yet he was very passionate about many things. Many of us have our favourite Om stories, but they mostly centre around how he encouraged us. Om Sharma was truly a great clinician and teacher, who not only added new knowledge to the mysteries of sarcoidosis, but kept news of this disease important for patients and physicians outside the field. His persona embodied the best qualities of a mentor, and of a wonderful and generous friend. Beside his professional merits we would like to stress Om Sharma's outstanding commitment towards his patients.

OM SHARMA: PIONEER IN SARCOIDOSIS PATIENT CARE, RESEARCHER AND TEACHER

Prof. Sharma was a well-known and internationally respected physician, clinical scientist, teacher, medical historian and humanist. He was born in India where he graduated from Victoria College and attended G.R. Medical College in Gwalior. Afterwards, he worked in India, Scotland, England and the USA. In 1969 Dr. Sharma was appointed Assistant Professor and in 1983 promoted to full Professor of Medicine at the Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Prof. Sharma's academic and professional background encompasses many areas of pulmonary medicine, but he has mainly dedicated himself to the study of sarcoidosis. During his career that embraces 50 years of clinical and research experience, he has produced outstandingly clear, concise and informative books and monographs on sarcoidosis, general

pulmonary medicine and tropical medicine, and has written about 400 articles and short papers. Moreover, he was editor of the journal *Current Opinion in Pulmonary Medicine*, as well as editor of several books on interstitial lung diseases and tropical medicine. In addition, he has written several books and articles about other important scientists in medicine, including Samuel Johnson, Sheila Sherlock, and his close friend Gerry James. He delivered a great contribution to the educational, clinical and translational research areas of respiratory and critical care medicine. Just to mention one: in 1983 he and his group contributed to solving the puzzle of hypercalcaemia in sarcoidosis by showing that alveolar macrophages are able to produce calcitriol, the active form of vitamin D3.

OM SHARMA: CHALLENGER OF COOPERATION AND FOUNDING MEMBER OF WASOG

Prof. Sharma encouraged multidisciplinary, multicentric, national and international cooperation in caring for patients with interstitial lung diseases, especially sarcoidosis. Prof. Sharma's interest and achievements in sarcoidosis in particular led to his presidency of the World Association of Sarcoidosis and other Granulomatous disorders (WASOG) from 1999 till 2008. During his tenure as president, he worked with Dr Geraint James and Gianfranco Rizzato as they helped standardise the sarcoidosis definition throughout the world. He was part of the first European Respiratory Society/American Thoracic Society/WASOG statement regarding sarcoidosis. Prof. Sharma's insights into the various clinical manifestations of the disease led to a large clinic in Los Angeles. For decades, his work has attracted chest disease specialists as well as general physicians interested in sarcoidosis, immunological lung disease and granulomatous lung disorders. His devotion to investigating the aetiology of sarcoidosis has resulted in national and international educational and research collaborations. He shared his fascination for the disease with many people and introduced them into the sarcoidosis world and made the international sarcoidosis family grow.

GANESHA: THE ELEPHANT-DEITY RIDING A MOUSE

Om Sharma loved to tell the story of Ganesha, the Lord of success and destroyer of evils and obstacles, who has become one of the commonest mnemonics for anything associated with Hinduism. Ganesha is also worshipped as the god of education, knowledge, wisdom and wealth. Ganesha's head symbolises the *Atman* or the soul, which is the ultimate supreme reality of human existence, and his human body signifies *Maya* or the earthly existence of human beings. The elephant head denotes wisdom and its trunk represents *Om*, the sound symbol of cosmic reality. *Om* or *Aum* is of paramount importance in Hinduism. This symbol, which represents both the unmanifest

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FIGURE 1. Prof. Om P. Sharma: a countless teacher, model and source of inspiration.

and manifest aspects of God, encompasses all potentialities and possibilities. In his upper right hand Ganesha holds a goad, which helps him propel mankind forward on the eternal path and remove obstacles from the way. The noose in Ganesha's left hand is a gentle implement to capture all difficulties. The broken tusk that Ganesha holds like a pen in his lower right hand is a symbol of sacrifice, which he broke for writing the Mahabharata. The rosary in his other hand suggests that the pursuit of knowledge should be continuous. The *laddoo* (sweet) he holds in his trunk indicates that one must discover the sweetness of the *Atman*. His fan-like ears convey that he is all ears to our petition. The snake that runs round his waist represents energy in all forms. And he is humble enough to ride the lowest of creatures, a mouse. Ganesha is considered to be the Lord of letters and learning, just like Prof. Om Sharma for people who knew him.

UNRAVEL THE PUZZLE TOGETHER WITH THE PATIENT

Sarcoidosis is a fickle disorder. Prof. Sharma called sarcoidosis "a chameleon-like disease" and stressed that a patient should always be taken seriously. In order to find out what is wrong with someone, and how a certain disorder can develop, it is of essential importance to acquire adequate information about everything someone has done. You cannot make it with a brief case history. An extensive inventory of possible contacts and exposure is necessary. The doctor has to be persistent and dogged. Asking the right questions and being a good listener can help. In practice, this quite often suffers from lack of time, which can curtail the perseverance and forbearance of the caregiver. The right dose of curiosity is essential, bearing in mind the fact that the potential cause of diffuse lung diseases may be any particles or substances that have been present in the air inhaled or in the blood. Creativity is a precondition to identify possible "triggers" with the patient. The approach is comparable with that of a detective. Sherlock Holmes made use of what is known as the deduction method. Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was an ophthalmologist. He described the disease of a family with multisystem disease presenting with uveitis, skin lesions and arthritis as gout [1]. Om Sharma pointed out that this clinical manifestation strongly suggested sarcoidosis and not gout [2].

Jonathan Hutchinson who was the first to describe the skin lesions of sarcoidosis was a consultant in the hospital where Arthur Conan Doyle worked in London. It is likely that Jonathan Hutchinson's interests, lectures and publications greatly influenced Conan Doyle. Indeed skin disease became basic ingredients of the plots of many of Sherlock Holmes adventures.

FATIGUE IN SARCOIDOSIS AND SOCIAL IMPACT FOR THE PATIENTS

Fatigue in association with a systemic illness like sarcoidosis can be ominous. Although interest in understanding the pathogenesis of fatigue is of relatively recent onset, the symptom has been with us forever. Management of the patient with fatigue requires more than prescribing drugs. Prof. Sharma always stressed that it is important that the physician listens to the patient; it is wise to believe what the patient says. In addition, patients should be encouraged to avoid physical or emotional stress and to pace their activities. They should also be instructed to lead as active and involved a life as possible.

"In the morning a man walks with his whole body; in the evening, only with his legs." (Emerson.)

Prof. Sharma was the first to describe the four types of fatigue that can be recognised in sarcoidosis [3].

- 1) Early morning fatigue, where the patient either is not able to arise or arises with feelings of inadequate sleep. This type of fatigue is also seen in patients with autoimmune diseases and may reflect troublesome muscle or joint pains or sleep disorders, such as sleep apnoea syndrome.
- 2) Intermittent fatigue, where the patient wakes up normally but after a few hours of activity, feels tired and exhausted. After a short rest of an hour or so, the patient is able to resume activity, only to be succumbed soon after by another episode of fatigue.
- 3) Afternoon fatigue, where the patient arises in the morning with adequate energy but "runs out of gas" or "feels washed up" in the early afternoon. These patients compare their fatigue to "having a flu-like syndrome".
- 4) Post-sarcoidosis chronic fatigue syndrome. This occurs in about 5% of patients who seemingly have recovered from active sarcoidosis. The phenomenon has attracted many synonyms, including post viral fatigue syndrome, Royal Free disease, myalgic encephalomyelitis, fibromyalgia, and others. The persistent symptoms are widespread myalgia, incapacitating fatigue and depression. Physical signs are absent.

This observation, and others made by Prof. Om Sharma, are of major social importance in view of the fact that sarcoidosis is generally seen among relatively young people. Understanding of a patient's surroundings and above all recognition of the problem is very important for the healing process. In addition it is important that patients themselves learn to cope with being ill and learn to accept their limitations [4]. These are lessons we have learned from Prof. Sharma as well.

CARE AND ITS PROVISION: LESSONS FROM OM SHARMA

The complexity of the medical sciences makes it necessary to introduce increasing specialisation. Doctors are more or less



FIGURE 2. Om and Maggie Sharma in Athens, WASOG meeting, June 2008.

forced to restrict themselves to their own special fields. This does not mean literally that the doctor cannot or should not stray far from home, as it were. Knowledge of each other's ability and cooperation is needed to interpret certain observations. Taking care of sarcoidosis patients implies that you should not focus too much: "There's no such word as can't." That is a lesson to be always remembered when striving for answers, not to give up too soon. It is important that integral and generalistic thought should continue to be integrated in specialist actions and approaches to each patient. Beside teaching us these lessons, Prof. Sharma was one of the first physicians with a website of his own, where patients could find information such as frequently asked questions, presentations and articles on sarcoidosis.

Just one reaction of a patient, of which you can find more on the WASOG website [5], was as follows.

"25 years ago, when I was diagnosed with this strange disease, sarcoidosis and being an engineer, I traveled to the CU medical library to learn about the disease. After much research, one name came up over and over again (Prof. Om P. Sharma) and it was obvious that he was a leader in the study of and research into this disease. 25 years later, I am currently a stage four out

of four and have been treated for the past 25 years by the wonderful staff at National Jewish. My options have dwindled and we are looking now at experimental drugs and then possibly a lung transplant. When I asked my National Jewish doctor if I should get a second opinion to see if I left any stone unturned, she suggested Prof. Sharma. This was in January of 2012. I sent Prof. Sharma an e-mail on a Saturday night asking if I could make an appointment and before Sunday morning I had received the response "absolutely". Before my appointment, my wife was diagnosed with cancer and her surgery was scheduled the day after my appointment was to occur with Prof. Sharma. I sent an e-mail asking if I could fly in and fly out the same day and the next day, to my amazement, I received a phone call from Prof. Sharma! He spent 45 minutes on the phone with me telling me I didn't need to come see him he knew what my options were and I should stay in Colorado and take care of my wife's condition. What other doctor would have taken the time to do this? I feel truly blessed to have at least talked to him on the phone."

As doctors we have a wonderful profession. We are the detectives of the healthcare system. We have to be patient and willing, if necessary, to stray from the well-beaten path. Keep striving for the right cooperation and communicate laterally: that can lead to answers you would never have thought of. Keeping this in mind we can honour Prof. Sharma!

Om Sharma embodied the best qualities of a leader, a mentor, a loyal family man, and a dependable friend. We offer our sincere condolences to his wife Maggie and his family. He will be sadly missed by those who knew him, those who loved him and those who wished to have known him.

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