

RUSTOM JAL VAKIL

(1911-1974)

Elected F.N.I. 1959

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

RUSTOM JAL VAKIL was born in Bombay on 17th July 1911. The only son of Dr. Jal and Jerbanoo Vakil, he had his school education at the Bharda New High School, Bombay. His father was a busy general medical practitioner and Rusi was largely influenced, in his early years as a child, by his mother who was a lady of drive and determination. This is borne out by an incident when the young boy was seeking admission to school. A few weeks before joining the New High School, he was taken by his mother, through the insistence of friends, to the principal of an English school, which was the pride of the well-to-do classes in those days. During the entire interview for admission which lasted about half-an-hour, and which was more in the nature of a legal cross-examination than a search for information, Mrs. Vakil and the young boy were kept standing, while the English principal was comfortably reposed in a posh arm-chair. After the interview when the principal pronounced his final verdict, "I am afraid your son is not good enough for our school." Mrs. Vakil came up with a parting shot that left an enduring impression on the young lad's mind—"I am not sorry my son fails to get admission in your school. He might have picked up the bad manners of the principal who did not even have the courtesy to offer a seat to a lady".

HIGHER EDUCATION IN U.K.

After receiving his early college education at the Elphinstone College and Royal Institute of Science, Vakil proceeded to England, accompanied by his mother, having already lost his father while still at school. In London he secured admission at the St. Thomas' Hospital Medical School from where he graduated in the year 1934. During his medical college career, he won 27 prizes including the '*Mead, Seymour, Graves Toller, Wainwright and Lalkaka Medals*' of the London University. Dr. Vakil passed his M.R.C.P. (Lond.) examination at the young age of 24 years in 1936 followed by M.D. of the same University in 1937 both at first attempt.

MEDICAL CAREER IN INDIA

Returning to India in 1938, Dr. Vakil started consulting practice. His exceptional qualities made themselves apparent and he soon built up a large private practice. He was appointed Asst. Hon. Physician to the J.J. Hospital and Grant Medical





Kustan Lal Vakil
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College and after a short while took up a similar appointment at the K.E.M., Hospital and Seth G.S. Medical College. He was a very popular teacher. Students used to flock to Dr. Vakil's clinics not only because of his simple style of teaching but also because of his wit and humour.

Dr. Vakil was an astute clinician and believed that *“although instrumental aid may be indispensable to cardiac diagnosis today, they should be used to supplement clinical methods of examining the patient”*. And he quoted Sir John Ryle, *“Eyes without the microscope, ears without stethoscope and wits without the help of chemistry and radiology can often carry us a long way.”*

As a clinician, Dr. Vakil impressed everyone by his competence and efficiency. He had a delightful charm of manner. During all the years of practice, his reputation enforced by his writings grew and he was perhaps the most sought after cardiologist in India. In fact, Dr. Vakil was one of the first to introduce specialisation in cardiology in this country and restricted himself to this branch of medicine.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

During Dr. Vakil's eventful career, his pen was fully employed and there must be very few clinicians to whom writing came so easy. His publications made a long list, but his most notable contribution was his historical paper on the use of *Rauwolfia serpentina* for the treatment of high blood pressure which appeared in the *Br. Heart J.*, in 1949. Following its publication, many millions of patients all over the world began to be treated for hypertension with this drug and efforts made to synthesize and employ therapeutically many other drugs for the treatment of this malady.

Reference to Dr. Vakil's research in this direction was made during the 85th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association in 1957.

“In a historical paper on the use of ‘Rauwolfia’ in hypertension, which appeared in the British Medical Journal in 1949, he summed up 10 years of careful conscientious work that he had carried out personally, added the opinion of some 50 other physicians who had worked with ‘Rauwolfia’ in hypertension and produced a document which brought this drug finally and decisively into Western medicine. The ‘Rauwolfia’ alkaloid, reserpine, was found to be a powerful tranquillising agent and identified as a valuable addition to psychiatric therapy. But more than that, it opened an entirely new method of therapy of mental disorder itself. For his part in this epoch-making advance, the American Public Health Association is proud to present this Albert Lasker Award”.

Dr. Vakil was the first Asian to receive the International Albert Lasker Award. The Lasker awards are given by the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation to individual and groups for “outstanding contribution in research related to diseases which are the main cause of death and disability and for distinguished service in the field of public health administration”. A souvenir issued on the occasion of the presentation of the awards had this to say: *“The story of ‘Rauwolfia serpentina’ is an example of a block in medical communication that in retrospect seems hard to understand. This drug had been used in ancient Ayurveda medicine in India for hundreds*



of years and had been the subject of modern scientific research in India since at least 1731, it had been repeatedly reported as a psychiatric and anti-hypertensive therapy in the technical journals of India and these publications were available in scientific libraries everywhere. Yet, while innumerable fruitless leads were being followed by Western medicine, this important one was overlooked until attention was finally focussed on it by Dr. Vakil”.

The introduction of *Rauwolfia* to Western medicine was described by the then Surgeon-General, U.S.A. as a “*trail-blazing and an epoch-making discovery*”, while Dr. Vakil was referred to at the time of announcement of the Award ceremony of the Lasker Foundation as the ‘Father of Indian Cardiology’ and ‘Father of *Rauwolfia*’.

There is further reference to Dr. Vakil’s contribution in this direction in the ‘*Autobiography of Science*’ by Moulton and Schiffers (John Murray, London, 1960):

“New and more successful lines of treatment for both heart disease and mental or emotional ailments quickly arose from the introduction of an ancient folk remedy of the Far East, *Rauwolfia serpentina*, also known as Indian snake root, into Western medicine. Much of the credit for this goes to an Indian physician, Rustom Jal Vakil, of the Cardiovascular Department of the King Edward VII Memorial Hospital, Bombay, India”.

Dr. Vakil had several firsts to his credit. He was the first to carry out large scale statistical studies on the incidence of various types of heart disease especially coronary heart disease. He published a survey of 20 years study of several thousand cases of isochemic heart disease, including 25,000 cases of coronary thrombosis observed personally.

Dr. Vakil was the first to use the term ‘pre-infarction syndrome’. It was born out of a study and description of 360 cases of coronary heart diseases.

In response to an invitation from the American College of Cardiology, he submitted an epidemiological survey of cardiovascular disease in India based on the study of 15,000 cardiac patients.

Dr. Vakil was responsible for the study and publication, once again for the first time in this country, of normal electrocardiographic standards and normal blood pressure standards for Indian subjects with special reference to young age groups. He also published a large statistical study of 1860 cases of heart disease, with individual studies of different types of affections such as hypertensive, syphilitic, coronary, pulmonary and rheumatic forms of cardiovascular maladies.

Besides the ‘pre-infarction syndrome,’ we owe to Dr. Vakil some entirely new clinical entities in medical science, namely ‘hexalogy of the heart’, ‘giant cell arteritis in aortic regurgitation’, ‘transitory pulsation in coronary thrombosis’, ‘gummatous forms of rat-bite fever’ and ‘subacute pulmonary oedema’.

Being much in favour of clinical diagnosis, Dr. Vakil introduced a new classification for abnormal heart rhythms; and being aware of the increasing incidence of coronary heart disease, he made practical suggestions for starting a drive against coronary or atheromatous heart disease.

In his writings, Dr. Vakil suggested several new classifications for common



clinical conditions including anterior thoracic pain, left supramammary pain, congenital heart disease, heart murmurs, and of blood pressure phenomena.

Following his success with *Rauwolfia*, Dr. Vakil got interested in another ancient Indian plant *Nardestachya jatamanshi*, and wrote about its utility in the treatment of neuropsychiatric disorders.

Dr. Vakil had a fluency of speech which few could match and this combined with his sense of humour, earned him the reputation of being one of the most gifted and impressive public medical speakers.

A series of articles appeared in the '*Illustrated Weekly of India*' in 1964-1965 on 'The Medical Legacy'—a history of ancient Indian medicine and these were widely acclaimed.

AWARDS & HONOURS

Besides being the first Asian to receive the '*Lasker award*' (the other being Dr. Har Gobind Khorana who won the award 15 years later), Dr. Vakil was recipient of numerous honours, awards, prizes and medals both in this country and abroad. These included the '*Padma Bhushan*' by the President of India (1958), the first '*Dr. B. C. Roy Award*' of the Indian Medical Council for promoting cardiology in India (1969); the '*Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Award*' of the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research for "outstanding contribution to Cardiology (1965)" and the first '*Dhanwantri Award*' (1973) for being "the most outstanding medical personality of the year in India".

Dr. Vakil was an elected Fellow of over 20 International and National medical and scientific bodies, including the Royal College of Physicians of London, the American College of Cardiology, the American College of Physicians and the Indian National Science Academy. He was one of the four Indian clinicians to figure in the American "*Register of International Notables*". He was also a Fellow of the American Geriatrics Society; the Royal Society of Health; American Association for Advancement of Science; Royal Society of Tropical Medicine; Royal Society of Arts; the Royal College of Physicians, Glasgow; International College of Angiology; American Public Health Association; Royal Society of Medicine; International Academy of Chest Physicians and Surgeons; Indian Academy of Sciences; Royal Geographical Society; College of Physicians and Surgeons; Bombay; and Founder Fellow of the American College of Post-graduate Studies. He was a Member of the American Heart Association and a Director of All India Heart Foundation, New Delhi.

Dr. Vakil was Governor of the Western India Chapter of the American College of Chest Physicians; Co-ordinator of the All India Heart Foundation; Past-President of the Cardiological Society of India; Past-President of the Bombay Medical Union; Patron of the Society for the Prevention of Heart Disease, Bombay, and a Trustee of the Wadia Institute of Cardiology, Poona.

Dr. Vakil was invited from all over the country to deliver orations and lectures. He was Sir Nilratan Sircar Lecturer for 1957 and Dr. S. N. Bhansali Lecturer of Calcutta and Prizeman of the Bombay Medical Union in 1960. He gave the



Arustha Memorial Lecture in 1962 in Hyderabad. He was Foundation Lecturer for the '*Maharashtra Medical Journal*', Poona in 1965 and the Netaji Bose Orator at Gwalior in 1966. He was chosen as the Vythilingam Orator at Vellore in 1967 and the Edward Pinto Orator at Secunderabad in the same year. Dr. Vakil was the Awalanada Das Memorial Lecturer of the Cardiological Society of India in 1970. He was awarded the '*V World Congress of Cardiology Souvenir Award*' given by the Cardiological Society of India in 1971.

Dr. Vakil besides being associated with the K. E. M. Hospital, Bombay, held a number of hospital appointments over the years. He was a Visiting Cardiologist to the Sir Nanavaty Hospital, the Sir J. J. Group of Hospitals, the Bombay Hospital, the Parsee General Hospital, the J. N. Railway Hospital and the Bhatia General Hospital.

HIS PUBLICATIONS

Besides being the author of several contributions to medical literature and Editor of more than one medical journal, he was the author of several books on cardiology and other subjects used by students and doctors. His book '*Clinical Diagnosis*', a text book of symptoms and signs, is very popular with students in several countries and was well reviewed in foreign journals. He was solely responsible for editing the first '*Text-Book of Medicine*' by Indian authors published by the Association of Physicians of India. The text book on '*Diagnosis and Management of Medical Emergencies*' was recommended by Lord Rosenheim, President of the Royal College of Physicians of London.

Dr. Vakil did not restrict himself to writing for the benefit of the medical profession, but used his wide reading to the advantage of the layman also.

"*The Romance of Healing and other Essays*" were based on lectures and addresses delivered by him and articles contributed to the '*Illustrated Weekly of India*' and other periodicals. In this book, a wide variety of medical and allied subjects was discussed in simple and lucid style, the author adopting a historic perspective in his presentation. The essay 'The Physician in Shakespeare' has an evaluation of Shakespeare's 37 plays in relation to medical references and descriptions.

"*Our Glorious Heritage*", commended by the late President of India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, to the 'Cultivated Reader', gave a brief history of medicine, particularly India's contribution to the art and science of healing.

The book "*Heart in Health and Disease*" contained information about the structure, functions, behaviour and accomplishments of the human heart, under physiological and pathological conditions and in his usual easy style, the author presented useful information about the virtues and vagaries of the human heart.

HIS QUALITIES

Rustom Jal Vakil was a warm-hearted, friendly and modest man who loved his profession. He was completely devoid of all pomposity and affectation. His character and personality, unspoilt by worldly success and renown, combined



with his vast clinical knowledge and wisdom went to make him the ideal physician whose advice was sought by patients in all walks of life. Although never absconding from his personal natural dignity, he was fond of good food and convivial company. Dr. Vakil's two most favourite pastimes were music and dancing. He had a special knack of telling a good joke.

Dr. Rustom Vakil was generous at heart. He established by donation the 'Dr. R. Jal Vakil Gold Medal' for the All India Heart Foundation and the 'Mrs. J. N. Vakil Medal and Lectureship' in Cardiology for the Association of Physicians of India as also the 'Dr. R. Jal Vakil Lectureship' of the Bombay Medical Union.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE VAKIL INSTITUTE OF CARDIOLOGY

A few months before his death, Dr. Vakil saw his long-cherished wish come true in the establishment of the Vakil Institute of Cardiology and Research Centre at the K. E. M. Hospital, Bombay, to which he gave a personal contribution of Rupees one lakh. A further sum of four lakhs was donated by friends and admirers of Dr. Vakil. The Institute and Research Centre was inaugurated by the Governor of Bombay at the K. E. M. Hospital on 28th September, 1974. Meant to pursue the activities in Cardiology founded by Dr. Vakil, the Institute is devoted to the prevention, early detection and treatment of diseases of the heart.

HIS UNTIMELY DEATH

The untimely death of Dr. Vakil in Bombay on 20th November, 1974 from aortic dissection and myocardial infarction stunned many who knew him and his great qualities and achievements. It is to be hoped that the qualities which he so notably exemplified will continue to enrich the profession of medicine so that while retaining the scientific background it may not cease to be an art. Dr. Vakil walked gracefully through life and his premature death has left a void in the field of cardiology that is difficult to fill. Dr. Vakil is survived by his wife Jeroo.

ASPI F. GOLWALA

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