

Harbinger of Women's health care

Radhika Rajamani

One is struck by the cheerful demeanour and the way he opened the door, switched on the lights to usher you into the KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre for Breast Diseases. Within a short span of time, Dr. P. Raghu Ram has walked into the hearts of many Hyderabadis with his diligent onco-plastic surgical work and the systematic approach to knowledge dissemination of breast cancer and creation of the KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre for Breast Diseases and Ushalakshmi Breast Foundation. It is by no means an easy task to give up a bright and lucrative career in the United Kingdom to do something for your native land and espouse a cause but Dr. Raghu Ram did it all about a year and a half ago at the pinnacle of his career to make a difference by literally starting anew in India. He chose a two-pronged approach to look at breast cancer through the KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre for Breast Diseases and Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation. Totally and tirelessly dedicated to this cause, Dr. Raghu Ram is consolidating and strengthening his outreach efforts in order to reach out to more.

The initial years The path to this journey was certainly not an easy one. Reminiscing his early days Dr. Raghu Ram says: "I always wanted to be a doctor and as a child played a doctor at home. My parents being doctors had a considerable influence on me." After studying in Hyderabad Public School, he shifted to Siddharth Medical College, Vijayawada to do his MBBS and lived with his grandparents. "Those years were not stressful. I had a happy-go-lucky time and was the Cultural Secretary of the Students Association. I was just an average student. I used to organise events in college." Living with grandparents "taught me many things

like family bonds, to practice ethically and with responsibility." (My grandfather was a lawyer who left his law as immoral practices had set in and turned writer).

Dr. Raghu Ram wanted to be a surgeon and after his MBBS enrolled into Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore for M.S. Everyone would have thought it must be a cakewalk for him as his father was the President of



Dr. Raghu Ram

the Association of the Surgeons of India. "However I realised I had to excel and I had to work hard." He proved himself by topping the exams.

Achieving distinction His next ambition was to pass FRCS and in 1997 he landed in Glasgow after clearing the entrance exam. He underwent all the hardships living alone. "I was the only child and I was brought in a pampered way. I couldn't make a cup of tea. Living in the UK taught me how to live frugally. It taught me self reliance. Since I was determined to do the FRCS, the focus was on the goal. I honestly believed that God has been guiding me all the way."



Dr. Raghu Ram with Jeannie Mulford, US Ambassador of India

One of the best moments of his professional life came when he got the triple FRCS from Ireland, Glasgow and Edinburgh passing through 60 examiners. He is the only practicing doctor in Andhra Pradesh and one among the few in the country to have this distinction.

Specialising in breast surgery It was at that point of time that breast surgery was evolving as a sub speciality. He evinced interest in it and joined Cardiff Breast Unit and later worked in Nottingham Breast Institute (where he was chosen on a national selection basis to a sub-speciality fellowship in onco-plastic breast surgery) and subsequently Royal Maasden Hospital London (world's oldest and Europe's largest Cancer centres) thereby honing his skills as an onco-plastic breast surgeon. He also picked up wire-guided breast surgery (which is normally done under the guidance of a radiologist). He saw in the UK everything was available for the patient in one spot – from examination, breast-imaging and biopsy (if necessary) and counselling (which is very important). "I learnt the importance of counselling and its value abroad.

While Dr. Raghu Ram specialised in onco-plastic breast surgery, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer on one of the trips his parents had come on. "She was

treated and then I started thinking about how far behind India is in breast cancer treatment. There are no dedicated breast cancer specialised units. Very few patients survive. Startling facts came up. I thought of returning to India."

Return to the roots Dr. Raghu Ram took the decision to come back when they had a settled status, his wife was also doing well as a doctor and more importantly he was at the zenith of his career. "My parents didn't want us to comeback. I too thought about it, but I realised if I am in an established society I am part of a system, and if I go back to India I can make a difference. I may not be successful but I will be serving my own people and would have that satisfaction." So the call of India and to work here was so strong that he chose to come back and with the help of his school friend, Satish Reddy (COO and MD of Dr. Reddy's Laboratories) he chose to make his dream and vision come true.

Visualising the approach The path to realising the dream was not effortless. "I just didn't want to come home and do the regular practice. I wanted to improve the delivery of breast health care and reach out to more people. There were options like I could come and work in a hospital or I could establish my own set up which would take

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up time in managing. Satish Reddy instilled the idea of a Foundation. Around 2004 the Krishna Institute of Medical Sciences was established and my parents Dr. Chalapathi Rao and Dr. Ushalakshmi were in the team involved in the planning. Dr. Bhaskar Rao of KIMS said I could come here and offered unconditional support. It was totally God sent. The planning and implementation took about two and a half years. The Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation was set up. At the same time we wanted to create awareness and get people to have screenings done. So the KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre for Breast Diseases was set up. (Not all breast problems land up in cancer. There are some which are benign too). Dr. Bhaskar Rao gave me whatever I wanted – even a digital mammogram facility. I designed the whole place. We wanted women to have screenings done in a comfortable fashion where they could have them done in one place instead of running around different places.”

Knowledge dissemination and counselling is important in such an endeavour, especially since most of the population is uninformed or not totally aware. So Dr. Raghu Ram contacted Cancer Care UK which is the largest provider of information, practical assistance and emotional support to those affected by the ailment to help produce booklets on various aspects in simple language. “They agreed to associate with us and reproduce the material with minor modifications. All this information is available on www.breastcancerindia.org.” Through the Foundation, Dr. Raghu Ram addressed doctors, gynaecologists and medical associations in districts/towns and some women’s organisations of Andhra Pradesh. Not just resting on this he also brought awareness by organising unique initiatives like a Pink Ribbon Nite wherein breast cancer survivors like Marcia Barret (Boney M) performed and Jeannie Mulford and David Mulford, US Ambassador to India attended. Another one on International Women’s Day (March 8, 2009) with Pamela Chopra (wife

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of Yash Chopra of Yashraj Films) and actor Gautami – both survivors participated.

During the year of his return - October 2007, and after the establishment of the Centre he organised a mobile breast screening wherein 1000 women were screened under the supervision of two senior radiologists from Jarvis Breast Screening Centre, London. Another 500 women were screened and out of the 1500 screened quite a few are from families below poverty line.

Family time and pastimes Dr. Raghu Ram balances his work with his personal life. He loves to spend time with the family comprising his wife Vyjayanti, sons Sairam and Krishnasai. “My wife Vyjayanti is a bright doctor. She is one of the few practicing Fertility specialist in AP and the Sub-continent (with an accreditation in reproductive medicine from the Royal College of Obstetrician and Gynecologists in London). She has set up the KIMS Fertility Centre. She too is very much a family person.” Dr Raghu Ram does not practice beyond 5.30 pm. He can stretch his working hours and earn more but for him “volume is not important but service and quality is. Breast cancer is urgent but not an emergency.” He is fond of swimming. A connoisseur of classical dance and theatre, he is often seen in the cultural circuit. He loves unwinding by giving his young son a bath and talking to him.

Dr. Raghu Ram has also begun Aasha, a Breast Cancer Support Group where patients and survivors get together as a psychological group and discuss various issues. “We plan to have 12 meetings where we focus on one issue in a meeting. The first one held recently was on nutrition.” He urges women above the age of 40 to have regular screenings to detect cancer early.

Dr. Raghu Ram has certainly set a benchmark in health care. And he has many goals to achieve. But as Robert Frost said: *The woods are dark and deep. But I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep.*