

Tribute to a great rheumatology teacher: Professor Debashish Danda (1958-2024)

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On 24th February, 2024, The Rheumatology Society lost Professor Debashish Danda to a motor vehicle accident in Vellore, India. He had recently (October 2023) retired as past founding Chair of the Department of Rheumatology at Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India where he had built the department from the year 2004 and led it to a world class centre in both research and clinical care. He had been chair there for about 15 years (2004-2018). In addition, he had just finished his term as President (2021-2023) of Asia Pacific League Against Rheumatism (APLAR). Prof Danda also served as President of India Rheumatology Association, IRA (2017-2019). He also served as chair of the International League against Rheumatism (ILAR; 2022), and Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Rheumatic Diseases* (2012-18). He was a fellow of the American College of Rheumatology (ACR), fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, London; and fellow of the National Academy of Medical Sciences, India. He was well regarded in India and the larger Asian region for his services to rheumatology. In November 2023, the ACR awarded him the ACR Distinguished International Rheumatology Professional to the delight of many Indian and international rheumatology colleagues.

A chance meeting in the social media pages led him to offer me a study opportunity at his department and I graciously took up the opportunity, applied formally to the college and spent six months at CMC, Department of Rheumatology. Those six months led to some close interaction. Herein with some forethought that six months is a short time to truly know someone well, I give my tribute. Five things made him stand out:

1. *Skilled and compassionate clinician:* Professor Danda was skilled and compassionate and this partly attracted many patients from other Asian countries including Bangladesh,

Thailand, Cambodia to his clinic. He would listen keenly, examine carefully and list his differentials before ordering for tests. He would then reserve some time (usually 5-7 minutes) for the patients to ask their questions. And I was fortunate to observe this when I joined him for his rheumatology clinic days.

2. *Excellent clinical teacher:* He taught well, slowly and demonstrated examination findings to the fellows in rheumatology. He would ask questions, lots of them. Rheumatology fellows enjoyed the monthly Friday afternoon bedside teachings with him. One of his favourite subjects was Takayasu arteritis and he would spend up to 1 hour 30 minutes on the bedside teaching and discussing the case. We students eagerly awaited these monthly teachings.
3. *Competent researcher:* He was an avid researcher who put his department on the world map. He spent considerable time writing and planning for research projects most of which came off well. One of the projects which put his department and him on the world map was the Indian Disease Activity Index for Takayasu Arteritis (ITAS). He also collaborated with world class faculty which assisted in building the CMC Rheumatology Department profile and capacity.
4. *Visionary leadership:* He was a born leader. He could see clearly what needed to be done, and various ways of executing it. He joined CMC in 1997 and by 1998 already knew he should start the Rheumatology Department. He went to Adelaide University in early 2000s to train further in rheumatology and started the Department of Rheumatology on his return. As chair, he identified faculty who would help him nurture and grow the department. As President of APLAR, he began the APLAR Academy where Rheumatology Fellows and junior rheumatologists would present interesting cases to the

wider Asian region under the mentorship of senior rheumatologists. This improved the education of young rheumatologists as well as encouraged collaboration among different rheumatologists.

5. *Truthful person:* I quietly found out that Prof Danda was a truthful person. He would tell you what he thought about an issue in a respectful manner. If the junior faculty did something good, he would compliment them; and conversely if they made mistakes, he would speak his mind without fear. This partly contributed to the respect he got within the academia.

Having said all those good things, no man is an angel, and would briefly touch on one negative trait I observed: He seemed impatient and always in a hurry, and occasionally came across as rude. On the whole, he

was a nice person. Prof Danda is survived by his spouse, Sumita Danda, Department of Medical Genetics, CMC and a son, Asheerwad Danda.

Fare thee well my friend, mentor, teacher. The Rheumatology Society will miss you.

Declaration: The author, CO studied at CMC between June - December 2019 and knew Professor Danda personally.

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