

An Older Person Who Has Inspired Me: Dr Dhiren Rathod

I have known Dr Rathod for just a few months, meeting him shortly after he arrived at the care home in Sutton, south London which I visit, but I find him inspiring, and I want to share a little of his story with you.

Dr Dhiren, as he is known at the care home, was born in a small village near Amreli in Gujarat, India. He attended the village school and then lived with relatives when he moved away to study at secondary school. His family ran a small hospital, where he spent two years of his subsequent medical training. He graduated in 1970 and then came to England in 1972, to work in a hospital in Barrow-in-Furness, where he was a Senior House Officer in Gynaecology. It was also where his cousin worked. In total there are nine doctors within the wider family, practising in the UK and America. His older brother is a surgeon, and his son a GP. Quite a dynasty of devotion to the medical profession.

Dr Dhiren's medical roles over the years included heart surgery, qualifying in this area in the 1980s and then specialising in Neonates. He found paediatric surgery hard, because he struggled with the emotions he experienced when operating on babies and with the coping mechanisms he had to employ. He lived in a hospital flat in Manchester, so to be on hand for emergencies, and often worked 100 hours a week, leaving little time for family life. He then became a GP for a time, but he found this a little boring as it lacked challenge for him. Eventually he moved to St Helier Hospital in Sutton as an A & E consultant. But after six years, in 2013, Dr Dhiren had a stroke, leaving him unconscious for a week in Roehampton Hospital, and although he recovered sufficiently to return home, he had to retire. For ten years, he was cared for at home by his wife, Deborah, until she fell and broke her pelvis. It was at that point and in his late seventies that he came to live at the care home, where he has daily visits from his wife.

This brief story of his career is just a snapshot of Dr Dhiren's life as he told it to me, but it is not the whole story because there is so much more, and visiting the care home and meeting him was, as I said, inspirational for me. How often do we read an obituary or record of someone's life or hear a eulogy at a funeral or thanksgiving service and find ourselves wondering why we did not know hitherto unrevealed facets of someone's life and why we were only finding out after it is too late to explore these with them? Everyone has a story which deserves to be valued and acknowledged. These stories can be lost to the individual and others as memories fade, when family members and friends die and particularly when dementia blots out a life still being lived so that that person so quickly becomes just someone in a chair, the vibrance and importance of their life no longer known or spoken of. In speaking to Dr Dhiren, I could ask questions, an opportunity denied to me by many of the other residents, due to advanced dementia.

I gained the impression in my first meetings with Dr Dhiren and in the brief comments from others, that there was more to his life to acknowledge and celebrate. I had just had a time of worship and praise with the residents, and we had been talking about the importance of smiling. As usual, we visited some other residents in their rooms, including Dr Dhiren, taking our 'smiley' badges with us to distribute. He told me that on between eight and ten occasions, he had assisted his brother on the *Smile Trains, in African countries, repairing hare lips and cleft palates. These are life-changing operations which can alter the life experience of a child and their families, by giving back hope and a future to children, who are very often ostracized and kept hidden away. He spoke to me about it with such compassion and pride in the achievement of changing lives, and I felt very moved and fortunate to have met someone who carried out the medical interventions I had often read about.

Dr Dhiren has had a fulfilled and active life and career. He enjoyed sport and played tennis, golf, and squash. He has travelled all over the world and is a longstanding Rotarian, involved in charitable ventures and he travelled to Kerala and other parts of South India to set up and visit Rotarian-funded projects. After such a fulfilled career, he might easily be morose and even rage against these unforeseen circumstances he finds himself in, but he is calm and reflective and accepting of his new home. He does find life in the care home difficult, as it is often noisy with staff chatter, trolleys on the move, and the sounds of distress from other residents, especially at night. This brings me to the second aspect that I find inspirational about Dr Dhiren, which is his positive attitude and the effect he has on others.

Dr Dhiren has a kind face and a twinkle in his eye, and the ladies in the care home like him because he is charming. I have witnessed this first-hand as he talks to his fellow residents, and he often gives them chocolate treats. Many are not easy to communicate with, but he makes that effort to engage with them. He cared for people in his career, and he still does. His belief is that being a good human being is the most important way you should live. He is not 'religious', but feels he has a spiritual connection to the world and that being positive is also an important attribute to have. He told me that he was lucky to be a doctor and was able to make people well, and he is grateful for his life and opportunities. Positivity is his mantra, and he advocates living in the present, not dwelling on the past and on any of the mistakes that we as humans can make in our lives. He seeks to pass on this positivity to others, and to share his passion for medicine. He mentors students from a local secondary school, who visit the care home and are interested in studying medicine. They show respect for his achievements, and he talks to them about the importance of a positive attitude in the demanding training and practice of medicine.

For someone who was full of energy, had a job he found continually rewarding, enjoyed life and was not ready to retire, he could easily be despondent and rage against his misfortune. This was not, I am sure, the later-life scenario he had envisaged and yet he is accepting, he is cheerful and yes, positive. He made a difference to the lives of those he treated during his varied career, and he is still making a difference today. He inspires me to value my life experiences and to see good in them and consider the positive outcomes and effects they

have had in making me who I am today. We do not know what may befall us, but I hope and pray that I may have just a little of the grace that he has and retain the joy of life as I grow older.

*Smile Train is a registered charity, working with local medical partners around the world to bring free cleft treatments and lifesaving care to children 365 days a year - smiletrain.org.uk

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