



A Friend & a Comrade - Eulogy For Dr Balaji

By Dr Lee Wei Ling

I have known Balaji for 20 years. As a neurosurgeon and a neurologist, we often shared patients as well as cross-referred patients to each other. In 1991, there was a boy admitted to Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) with a rare, rapidly fatal condition, a subdural empyema. At that time, there was a famous paediatric neurologist from the Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, who was visiting TTSH. The paediatricians at TTSH presented the patient to him as an “interesting case”. The patient had already been seen by a junior neurosurgeon who did not recognise any neurosurgical problem. The visiting expert was alarmed and told me to get a neurosurgeon to operate on the patient as soon as possible. I called up Balaji, and was pleasantly surprised that he had already checked on the patient in spite of the junior neurosurgeon reporting back to him that the patient did not require neurosurgery. Balaji operated and the patient recovered fully. This was not the only time when another neurosurgeon made a mistake and Balaji quietly corrected it.

Balaji was perpetually in search of intellectual challenges. He did well in his Primary six school leaving examination and was accepted into Raffles Institution (RI), but his parents had him transferred to Siglap Secondary

School after Secondary 1. The reason was not the longer distance between RI and home but the fact that when Balaji was in RI, he spent his time at the National Library reading and returned home very late every day after school.

By chance this past Wednesday, two days after Balaji passed away, I was talking to a patient who has been under my care for many years. He is a tuition teacher. He told me that Balaji was his classmate in Siglap Secondary School; each year at prize giving, Balaji was the top student in almost all subjects. The patient added, “It was Balaji who referred me to see you, but did not specify your name in the referral letter.” He was a subsidised patient. The rule is that if a patient is referred to a specific doctor, he becomes a full paying patient. As the patient did not earn much, Balaji had coordinated for the patient to be under my care for epilepsy by a personal arrangement even though my name did not appear anywhere in the referral letter. Balaji did not forget old friends even after his own social status had risen above theirs. After entering politics, he moved from his old condominium to landed property located in his own group representation constituency (GRC), Ang Mo Kio, just outside the boundary of his own constituency, Cheng San, to be close to his constituents.

After Secondary 4, Balaji went on to National Junior College. He was one cohort behind me in medical school, so I did not get to know him until he had completed his neurosurgical training in the USA and returned to Singapore. In the early 1990s, when the new TTSH building was still in the planning stage, an oncologist at the Singapore General Hospital dissuaded the Ministry of Health (MOH) from allowing other public hospitals to develop radiotherapy facilities. Balaji had the foresight to see that cancer would be a very common illness with an aging population. To have radiotherapy facilities, the walls needed to be specially built to shield all from extraneous radiation. To do so whilst the entire building is being constructed would cost several hundred thousand dollars. To build radiotherapy bunkers in the same building retrospectively would cost much more and also create considerable disruption to hospital operations.

Initially MOH did not accept the argument but Balaji and I persisted. Eventually, our argument was accepted and the shielding was put in during the construction phase. Since 2002, TTSH offers radiotherapy for cancer patients instead of having to send them to other hospitals. This allows for a one stop holistic treatment, and the patient load more



▼ Presenting a speech at the SMA Annual Dinner 2010

▲ SMS Balaji Sadasivan was conferred SMA Honorary Membership

than justifies that relatively small cost incurred during the building of the new TTSH. We had other similar adventures together, always with the intention of improving our medical service.

In early 2001, I was seriously exploring enrolling in veterinary medicine in the USA. Balaji discouraged me from doing so and suggested I collaborate with him and Siemens to develop a neuronavigational system. This is a computerised image-guided system similar to the global positioning system (GPS) which helps the neurosurgeon locate brain tumours accurately and hence perform surgery with greater precision and safety. I did not take up the offer, but I was persuaded to drop the idea of going to veterinary school and continued as a neurologist.

In February 2001, I had a bad fracture which required several weeks of hospitalisation. Balaji visited me on several occasions. By then, Balaji had left TTSH for the private sector. He also discussed with me the possibility of him entering politics and I encouraged him. After the usual process that the PAP puts all potential candidates through, he was nominated for elections in Ang Mo Kio GRC. Balaji and I had anticipated that he would be no more than a Member of Parliament (MP) and would join the National Neuroscience Institute (NNI) as head

of neurosurgery. I was dismayed when I found he was made Minister of State as that meant he could not hold another job simultaneously. In retrospect, he was able to contribute more to Singapore in that capacity; and in my personal opinion, for the period that he was Minister of State (2001-2004) and then Senior Minister of State (2004-2006) at the Ministry of Health (MOH), he made very significant contributions. Several of his important contributions during his time at MOH were not known to the medical community or the lay public because he did not claim credit for his successful ideas which were implemented. He was missed by many when he moved to another Ministry In 2007. He was appointed Chairman of the Executive Board of the World Health Organisation in 2007. He was also Minister of State for Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Transport and subsequently Senior Minister of State Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts. Many of his contributions made to Singapore as Minister of State and Senior Minister of State have been publically detailed in the news following his demise, and I will not repeat them in my personal tribute to him.

At times, I regretted persuading him to enter politics, but Balaji himself had no regrets.

He felt that he was contributing to Singapore, and as a medical specialist myself, I knew that he was correct. As a Minister of State, he had a bigger influence on Singaporeans' welfare than as a neurosurgeon. When Hsien Loong as Prime Minister told him that he was not ready to be a full minister and asked if he would like to move back to the private sector, he replied that as long as he was useful as Senior Minister of State, he would stay on and do his best.

He faced his cancer and impending death with total equanimity. I first saw him after he had surgery for extensive cancer of the colon when I myself was hospitalised in SGH in January 2009 after a laparotomy. He said to me, "I had a happy childhood, I enjoyed school and university, I have a loving wife and two well brought up and loving children, I enjoyed my work as a neurosurgeon as well as in politics. This is the first misfortune I have had in my 54 years of life. I have no right to complain." Right up to the end, Balaji was calm and even cheerful, with no hint of fear.

I have lost not just a friend but a comrade who shared my aspirations. Perhaps his example will be emulated by other capable Singaporeans to step forward to enter politics and not worry about the loss of face many feel if they don't make it as a Minister. **SMA**