Dr. J. Jayalalithaa’s little known facet – PART 2

MMM - Undeterred support from laying foundation to inauguration. Only a few can conceive big dreams and turn them into reality

CHITRA BASKAR

1987: Late Chief Minister Dr. M.G.R gave the permission to start The Madras Medical Mission. But after his demise, we had to pursue the same with Dr. Jayalalithaa. When I requested her, she promptly agreed to lay the Foundation stone. During the ceremony, she donated her personal cheque for Rs. 5, 00,000/- as her contribution towards the cause. All formalities went ahead smoothly and we received total support right until we got dual power supply for the hospital up to the Compound wall and traffic light for the entire street. Two weeks before the inauguration I informed the Chief Minister that the approach road from Thirumangalam to MMM was bad. The road was widened, re-laid and a fish market encroachment at Thirumangalam was removed before the inauguration. She enhanced the image of Tamil Nadu amongst the over 150 foreign delegates. The world renowned Cardio Thoracic Surgeon Dr. Christaan Bernard openly appreciated that the approach to the hospital was very impressive.

Frontier Lifeline Inauguration - Support when I had fallen and risen too quickly

On 15th February 2004, I had gone to Kerala for the inauguration of our small unit. After the function I got a call from the CM’s office. I froze in surprise when I was told that she wanted to light the Kuthuvilakkku at around 11.00 am on 18th February. We did not have time to even print invitation cards. The next day I rushed back and sought an appointment with the Chief Minister. When I told her about the limited timeline, she again surprised me saying, “You don’t need any advertisement. I will be there by 11.30 am.”

All arrangements were quickly made to inaugurate Frontier Lifeline Hospital and the Chief Minister promptly reached there at 11.30 am on 18th February 2004. Her first question to me was, “Do you know why I chose today the 18th?” I asked whether 9 was her lucky number as most people suggested. She replied with a smile, “Today is MAHASHIVARATHRI and the auspicious time starts now.” She looked around the hospital and was impressed. Her next question was, “Do you want to build a hospital in the city, bigger than this to help more people through your Charitable Trust. I can help get 10 acres for you.” I replied that I would be unable to build another hospital right then, but would certainly be interested in contributing to MEDICAL SCIENCE by starting a Basic Medical Science Park in a village.

Inauguration of FLL, 18th Feb, 2004

The next day, I got a call from the Thiruvallur Collector that Madam had instructed him to identify a land in Thiruvallur District. Her personal involvement exhibited her great interest in the science of medicine. She trusted me to fulfill my duty. There is in fact considerable financial pressure due to losses incurred. I have had to withstand immense pressure from all stakeholders included Banks and financial institutions to sell out the project Mediville. I am holding out in the hope of turning things around. Being a great visionary, she could foresee that this project could become the FIRST MEDICAL SEZ in India.

— The writer is Director of X Factor group of companies

COMPASSION • COMMITMENT • CLINICAL EXCELLENCE

If you have a financial constraint to treat your heart condition, you may contact Dr. KM Cherian Foundation for help. For details, please visit www.frontierlifeline.com.
A little known facet

We all know that former Chief Minister and AIADMK general secretary Jayalalithaa was a pillar of strength and support for the downtrodden. She was equally a pillar for intellectuals and scholars in whom she saw the spark of innovation to help uplift the poor and the needy.

At the foundation stone-laying ceremony of the Madras Medical Mission, she donated a personal cheque for Rs.5,00,000. She also ensured that there was no bureaucratic delay at any stage of the construction. For the inauguration, she ordered the roads to be widened and relaid. The approach road was so good that visiting dignitaries, who included Dr. Christiaan Barnard, commented on it. The improvement in the infrastructure of Mogappair in the past two decades was mainly due to this enthusiasm she showed.

At the inauguration of Frontier Lifeline Hospital, she informed me that she would help me to get 10 acres within the city for another hospital. Instead, when I expressed my interest in developing a basic medical science park in a village, the Thiruvallur Collector informed me the very next day that the Chief Minister had instructed him to identify a site for the project. Her support gave me the strength to carry out research works which, when concluded, would bring accolades to the Indian medical fraternity. Be it the first by-pass heart surgery or the first paediatric heart transplant, I went ahead secure in the feeling that there was a very strong woman who was encouraging me and supporting me in bringing pride to India.

Dr. K.M. Cherian,
Chennai
HEART MATTERS

Is there any other word to describe the feeling?

Mother Teresa is canonized. Dr. Cherian's tumultuous feelings cannot be put into words. Many people, including some of his friends, thought that he was her physician. They were wrong.

In 1980, the Mother referred two small girls from a destitute home to the doctor. She requested their surgical treatment at a nominal cost. Her words were, “I cannot give you anything. My gratitude will be my prayer for you.” Her sincere words touched Dr. Cherian. The operations were performed. Before their discharge, she visited them in the hospital and prayed for them and the other patients there.

This incident gave rise to a long lasting friendship that saw Dr. Cherian operate on five to six children from her home. Their friendship flourished. Dr. Cherian loved to spend time with her as he felt they were divine experiences. She was inquisitive; wanted to know about everything from movie posters and actors to science and art. He eagerly waited for her yearly Christmas cards filled with her prayers. When she could not make it to Dr. Cherian’s daughter’s wedding, Mother Teresa sent a letter which is a treasured possession till this day. Though she had promised to grace the inauguration of Madras Medical Mission with an express wish of meeting Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and Dr. Christiaan Barnard, she was held up in China and could not make it.

One day Dr. Cherian was instructed by the Chief Minister’s office to receive Mother Teresa at the airport and escort her to the ‘Mother’s House’. The Mother was to be the Chief Guest at a function of the All India Women’s Association. Mother Teresa had a hectic schedule and requested Dr. Cherian to ensure that she reached the function on time and left within half an hour. Dr. Cherian obliged. They reached on time and exactly after half an hour, Dr. Cherian prompted Mother Teresa. The Chief Minister inquired as to the matter and when told the reason, she ensured that the Mother left without delay.

After a hectic day, when Dr. Cherian took her back to her home around 8.30 p.m., she instructed the sisters to give the doctor dinner as he had not had anything throughout the day. That was the last time he saw her.

Dr. Cherian cherishes his every interaction with Mother Teresa. Their friendship born out of a common service orientation lasted for 15 years till her death. She was a beacon of hope through all his troubles and sustained his confidence through her prayers. Dr. Cherian says, “She may not be here physically now, but her legacy lives on. We will not be here forever and even our memories will fade. But the Mother will live on. It is humbling to realize that I have known a Saint. I feel fortunate and touched by the Divine. Is there any way to convey my feelings fully?”

Dear Dr Cherian,

I do not know how to thank you for the substantial concessions given on the surgeries. May God bless you and the beautiful work you are doing for Him. May you continue to be His hands to heal and His heart to love all those who come to you in pain, sorrow and also great hope. God bless you.

(A letter from Mother Teresa to Dr Cherian)

— The writer is Director of X Factor Group of companies

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A BETTER SELF FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

CHITRA BASKAR

Dr. Cherian was having an exotic dinner on a pleasant evening in South Africa with Dr. Christiaan Barnard - his most favourite person in the world. They were at Dr. Barnard's residence and the ambience was balmy and soothing. Between sips of good South African wine, they discussed various topics far into the night, including how they first met in 1971 when Dr. Cherian was a Resident at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital during Dr. Barnard's visit as a Guest Lecturer for the hospital's Annual Day celebrations. During the discussions, one thing clearly emerged - Dr. Cherian's keen curiosity and unwavering thirst to LEARN the LATEST in the field of heart surgery. In order to upgrade his skills even further, Dr. Barnard suggested that Dr. Cherian learn and try to perform a cutting edge procedure called TMR (TransMyocardial laser Revascularization). He also suggested that Dr. Cherian talk to his friend Dr. Denton Cooley who was also to try out TMR.

Bombay where he called the operation as the conversion of a 'Mammalian Heart' into an 'Amphibian Heart' by employing acupuncture. The same principle was applied by Prof. Mir Ho Seni, of Iran.

TMR was made by a company known as PLC. PLC bought the patents to produce these machines. It had a Sales Representative settled in the United States. He was a Pakistani, who happened to be the 1st cousin of former cricketer Imran Khan.

Dr. Cherian recalled "We bought the first TMR machine in the whole of Australia / Asia to bring to our country. We introduced TMR in the country and we probably did the maximum number of cases in the world at a time when no other alternative procedure was available.

The TATA Group gave national publicity for this procedure initiated by Mr. R. K. Krishna Kumar who was the VP of TATAs then. Patients who were brought in as in-operative with total blockage in their right arteries and critical left main problems are now living in good health. Col. Venugopal was the first patient to undergo TMR. We have since done combinations of TMR and Bypass Surgery and Endarterectomy."

Later, the high penetrating power and voltage changes that occurred in the heart muscle were considered to be dangerous consequences of TMR and hence it became obsolete. Today, new technologies that use YAG Lasers instead of CO2 are being used (giving rise to the application of TMR again).

What started as a casual conversation between two persons born out of their respective interest and knowledge, benefited numerous end-stage cardiac patients. When Dr. Christiaan Barnard, the world's 1st heart transplant surgeon and his friend Dr. Cherian, discussed general developments and of challenging the status quo in patient care, the idea for using a most effective technology emerged which helped nearly 1,000 patients. When seeking to better oneself, it is ultimately society at large which gains the larger benefit.

The writer is Director of X Factor group of companies

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A TEST OF SPIRITUALITY - PART II

CHITRA BASKAR

Overcoming great odds, Dr. Cherian opened the St. Gregorios Cardio Vascular Centre, a tertiary speciality cardiac care center in the tiny village of Parumala, Kerala. The next step was to look into starting the medical college.

The husband of a German nurse serving in the hospital was an architect and he was inspired to develop a wonderful design for the proposed medical college. Dr. Cherian went ahead with all the necessary work from donations to designs. Unfortunately, due to mis-information which led to objections from the governing body of the church, the proposed medical college in Parumala did not materialize. Brilliant students and deserving candidates from the surrounding community and neighbouring regions lost the opportunity for an education which would have been on par with any of the best medical universities in the world, as affiliations with prestigious universities in US, UK and other advanced countries were assured for the same.

It is a monumental feat for a few committed individuals to make a dream a reality. But it is extremely easy to disrupt sincere efforts with ill-intentions and actions. Such is the dark side of humanity. A possibility thus became and remains a distant reality.

The Parumala hospital progressed rapidly and on an average performed 2,500 angios a year, which was more than any other hospital in Kerala. Former President of India the late Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, made an exclusive visit to this Centre. It was a moment of great pride for all concerned when he mentioned the St. Gregorios Cardio Vascular Centre in his address to the nation during India’s 57th Republic Day celebrations. Dr. Kalam said, “The state of the art hospital at Parumala under the leadership of Dr. K M Cherian, is carrying out valuable research in Tissue Culture for heart valves and is also performing heart operations. It is a hi-tech hospital in a rural setting. It is indeed noteworthy”.

During his visit to Parumala on 18th December 2005, Dr. Kalam stated, “I am happy to find that a high technology Cardiothoracic and Vascular Diseases Centre has been created in a remote panchayat (Parumala) in Kerala which is a dream for every rural Indian.”

An international cardiac workshop, “The Eurasian Workshop on Valve Repair” was also conducted in this rural tertiary care facility. It witnessed the presence and participation of over 150 experts from USA, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Outstanding, world renowned cardiovascular surgeons and highly acclaimed experts on Valve Repair Surgery, who were also key members of the European Valve Repair Task Force graced the event. Parumala, a humble pilgrimage centre, was transformed into a healthcare hub, a scientific retreat and a world-class treatment destination, especially for cardiac ailments.

Dr. Cherian says, “In our daily lives, we see many people who visit places of worship very regularly. Though they appear very spiritual, are they truly? I have heard a saying, ‘Closer to the church but further away from God’. Prayer is mere lip service to convince others. For me, it is just about helping humanity. That is service to God.”

— The story as expressed by Dr. Cherian

The writer is Director of X Factor group of companies

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CHITRA BASKAR

Dr. Cherian belongs to a generation which grew up focusing on substance rather than style. As a post-graduate general surgery student in Wenlock Government Hospital, his clothes were simple and repetitive just like most of his friends’ hailing from modest backgrounds.

One day his Professor Dr. MP Pai gave Dr. Cherian an envelope after he had assisted the professor in a hernia repair in a private nursing home. Tired after a hectic day he just slipped it into his pocket. Later he checked the envelope to find Rs. 15/- . He rushed back to Dr. Pai and said he could not take money for performing his professional duty as a student. Dr. Pai told Dr. Cherian to treat it as his first salary, saying Cherian, this is Lakshmi (the Hindu Goddess of Wealth). In life, you should never go after Lakshmi, always go after Saraswathi (the Goddess of Knowledge), then Lakshmi will be after you. These words changed Dr. Cherian’s outlook on life, money and medicine.

Next day in the surgical outpatient clinic, a frantic man came running in carrying a child of about 12. The girl had suffered burns throughout her body except her face. After cleaning the wounds, Dr Cherian wrote a prescription for 5 bottles of IV saline to replace the loss of fluids and two days’ dosage of crystalline penicillin to fight infection, the best available antibiotic then.

The father started crying saying that he did not have any money left for medicines. Dr. Cherian, a student, was not used to having much money either. As he was wondering what to do, he suddenly remembered Dr. Pai’s fee in his pocket. He gave the money to the girl’s father to buy medicines without a moment’s hesitation. The grateful father left, thanking the doctor. After the patient was shifted to the main hospital, Dr. Cherian forgot about the incident.

About 6 months later when he was in the same surgical outpatient clinic, a Muslim family approached him. Though the man looked familiar, Dr. Cherian could not place him. The man introduced his family and said his daughter had something for the doctor. Ayesha, the beautiful, healthy girl in a burqa, was the girl Dr. Cherian had treated for burns.

She shyly thrust a packet wrapped in a Kannada newspaper to the doctor. The father said, When we left, you were not here but she has never forgotten you and what you did for her. Ever since we went home, she has been collecting cashew nuts, frying and shelling them to bring you the best Kasergode cashew nuts.

Dr. Cherian was profoundly moved by the little girl’s action. He recalls, “The Rs 15/- was my first monetary reward as a professional, as well as my first personal contribution to improve someone’s health or life. This incident influenced Dr. Cherian’s outlook so deeply that he routinely conducts free surgical camps in India and abroad as he finds immense satisfaction in rendering service without expectation.

The fruits of righteous toil are truly sweet.

– The writer is Director of X Factor Group of companies
Selvi J. Jayalalithaa’s little known facet...

CHITRA BASKAR

We all know well that our beloved Chief Minister Dr. J. Jayalalithaa was pro-poor and her heart was full of compassion. But there was also another facet to the personality of this Iron Lady. She was pro-intellects too. Her heartbeat for the intellectual fraternity who in turn would do great good for the people of Tamil Nadu was praiseworthy. She had a knack of helping the needy by supporting deserving initiatives and right causes.

My first encounter with the lioness woman

I have known Dr. J. Jayalalithaa from 1988. When I started my career after forming Madras Medical Mission in rented premises of Vijaya Hospital, I got a call from CM’s office that she was coming to the hospital with a patient. I told them that she need not take the trouble of coming, and I could visit her. But she insisted and came with the patient. She said that all leading cardiologists had advised an Open Heart Surgery but she wanted one more opinion from a Surgeon. It was at that time we installed Cardiac Catheterization Lab in a room renovated from a kitchen.

The then SPG Chief Mr. R.M. Savani rang me up and informed me that the Chief Minister would be arriving in half an hour with the patient and she reached at 7.00 pm. On examining the patient, I was not convinced that the patient needed an Open Heart Surgery, so we did a Cardiac Catheterization to rule out the need for surgery. I told the CM, there was absolutely nothing to worry about the patient’s health and that they can stay for just a few hours and resume regular life. She informed the patient that, “This is Dr. Cherian’s Birthday gift to you, that you do not need any surgery”. This is my first encounter with the Hon’ble Chief Minister.

The undeterred support from laying the foundation till the inauguration of Madras Medical Mission – only a few can conceive big dreams coming into a reality

1986: Late Chief Minister Dr. M.G.R gave the permission to start The Madras Medical Mission, which was acquired by the Housing Board three times. But after various stages of his illness and demise, we had to pursue the same with his successor Selvi J. Jayalalithaa. Did Selvi J. Jayalalithaa come to our aid? How? Rest next week........

— The writer is Director of X Factor group of companies
Delhi to Chennai to Canada to Guyana....and then came the magic...

CHITRA BASKAR

Once Dr. Cherian was travelling in a flight from Delhi to Chennai. The 50 year old man sitting next to him was a Malayalee, Mr. Nair and that one fact was enough for them to start a conversation. Dr. Cherian discovered that Mr. Nair was from his grandmother's native village of Mavalikara, Kerala and that he knew her family.

Their interesting conversation covered various topics from Chennai to Delhi to Canada. Mr. Nair spoke of his daughter in Canada and her roommate Ms. Singh. Ms. Singh had raised funds for the NGO of her friend, the First Lady of Guyana. The NGO was taking 10 kids from Guyana to London for their heart surgery and Ms. Singh was to accompany them.

As usual, Dr. Cherian wanted to contribute and do something more. His one question to Mr. Nair was, “What if I operate on double number of kids for the same cost?” He requested Mr. Nair to get his daughter's opinion on this.

When this was conveyed to the NGO, the First Lady was very happy as the benefit of their service could be doubled. 18 kids were brought to Chennai. Ms. Singh accompanied the First Lady Ms. Varshini Jagdeo who wished to be involved in the entire process. By God's grace, the surgeries were successful and the children returned home healthy and happy.

During her visit, the First Lady came to know of the superspeciality cardiac hospital functioning under Dr. Cherian’s guidance and support in Parumala Village, a Christian pilgrimage centre in Kerala. She was highly impressed to know that super speciality facilities were available in a village with a population of 6,300 something not very common in the world. She wanted to replicate this model back home and made it a point to visit Parumala before she left to Guyana.

One year later, Dr. Cherian visited Guyana with his colleague Dr. Prem Sekar, Paediatric Cardiologist. Seeing their enthusiasm to screen underprivileged children, a Free Camp was organised and they screened about 250 children in a non-stop screening session of 2 days.

A thought is often all that is needed. A series of events then unfold leading to a magical moment like the events that led to the curing of 18 kids & screening 250 children - in a far away land. Subsequently Dr. Cherian operated on three more groups of children with heart disease, thus more than 50 children from Guyana were treated. From Delhi to Chennai to Canada to Guyana,... thoughts travel at the speed of light between the 'right minds' to generate an unstoppable wave of action which results in unparalleled positive results.

When we look back, we will realise that great outcomes have resulted from the 'right' thoughts.

— The writer is Director of X Factor Group of companies
A Test of Spirituality

CHITRA BASKAR

The tiny hamlet of Parumala in ‘God’s own country’ Kerala, is a serene and stunning seat of Nature with a population of just 6,300. The verdant landscape is breathtaking, thanks to three rivers. This serenity is aptly epitomized by the harmonious co-existence of Hindus, Muslims and Christians.

Another claim to fame is that Saint Geevarghese Mar Gregorios or Parumala Thirumeni lived and died here and was later consecrated in 1895, the first canonized Saint of the Syrian Orthodox Church. His tomb in the Parumala Church makes the village a Christian pilgrimage centre.

Dr. Cherian’s hometown is situated 4kms from Parumala. He used to conduct Free Camps every September to commemorate his mother’s death anniversary. A specially commissioned bus equipped with ECG, ECHO and Tread Mill facilities conducted a heart health-check in the surrounding villages free of cost. He was on the lookout for a place to conduct full-fledged cardiac screening when his father suggested Parumala. A small 50 year old mission hospital built by the Church functioned there. Dr. Cherian’s team began working with the hospital to conduct regular camps.

After a few well-received camps, the supreme Head of the Syrian Orthodox Church, H.H. Moran Mar Baselios Marthoma Mathews II suggested starting a Cardiology & Cardiac Surgery Unit for the poor people in and around Parumala.

These words were enough to launch Dr. Cherian on his path. Without a thought about the difficulties he would face from Madras Medical Mission (MMM) in Chennai, Dr. Cherian began the groundwork. The Syrian Orthodox Church later agreed to donate Rs. 50 lakhs.

Dr. Cherian says, “I wanted to start this work at once. I was confident that the MMM Management Committee would support this initiative as they primarily belonged to the Syrian Orthodox Church and were ardent followers of Parumala Thirumeni. Most of them regularly went on pilgrimages to Parumala. So I committed to pursue this noble work.”

He was overjoyed when most of the staff at MMM, from head nurse to ward boy, wished to participate in the initiative. He felt it was indeed a divine intervention. Dr. Cherian however, was shocked when the Management Committee and the Governing Board of MMM refused to support this objective. Their primary concern was that the number of patients from Kerala would reduce if a specialty cardiac centre functioned from Parumala. They went so far as to warn MMM employees of termination if they supported the effort.

Dr. Cherian was not to be denied. He was committed to a higher cause and went ahead to start the St. Gregorios Cardio Vascular Centre, a tertiary speciality care cardiac center in the village. Most of the equipments were donated by his friends. Today the hospital is a sophisticated Cardiac Care Centre handling complex heart problems both in children and adults, earlier only possible in urban centers.

At the inauguration of the St. Gregorios Cardio Vascular Centre, the then Chief Minister of Kerala Mr. A.K. Antony announced that if Dr. Cherian was to spearhead an effort to start a medical college in Parumala, he would not have to travel to Trivandrum for a “No Objection Certificate”. All he would have to do would be to write to him and the Kerala Government and he would be rendered all necessary assistance and support. This assurance of support set the ball rolling for Dr Cherian’s next mission. Did Dr. Cherian succeed in establishing a medical college in tiny Parumala?

To be continued...

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CHITRA BASKAR

An attractive advertisement by Billy Graham, Evangelist Association of USA, caught Dr. Cherian’s attention in the Journal of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery. It was for the sale of a second-hand heart-lung machine, preferably to benefit open-heart surgeries in a developing nation.

The Madras Medical Mission (MMM), a charitable society, was in the planning stage. Though the idea was mooted in 1986, the planning had been stalled as Dr. Cherian was in the USA for over a year to garner financial support for the Mission. A cardiac surgeon, he had decided to start with a Cardiac Vascular Surgery Unit along with a hundred and four like-minded people from the Syrian Orthodox Church at Broadway, Chennai. It would be the first cardiac specialty hospital in the country.

MMM initiated its activities in June 1987, at a rented location within the premises of Vijaya Hospital, a well-known hospital in Madras, started by Mr. B. Nagai Reddy of Vijaya Vauhini Studio.

Dr. Cherian decided to procure the heart-lung machine for MMM and flew to Charlotte from Baltimore, his brother’s residence. He then had to travel a distance of 15 miles from the airport to the headquarters of the Evangelist Association in BG Parkway, Charlotte, North Carolina. He rented a car and drove to a motel close to the Evangelist Headquarters. He missed his turning to the motel and had to travel nearly five more miles before he could turn back. Driving cautiously to avoid missing the turn again, he was on high alert. This helped him avoid a car that literally came out of nowhere. He had a narrow escape by the Grace of God. Thoroughly shaken, he finally reached his motel around midnight.

The next morning on reaching the address, he was sorely disappointed. The heart-lung machine was in very bad shape. It was very old and some essential parts were missing. The man who showed Dr. Cherian the machine could sense the doctor’s disappointment, but was unable to help. It was a gloomy but safe return journey.

His hopes had been dashed, but God works in mysterious ways. Dr. Cherian’s good intentions were rewarded. Even before he left the USA, he got a call from Dr. Philip Jacob, his colleague during his Senior House Surgery days in CMC Hospital, Vellore, who offered to donate a Heart-Lung machine. Apart from the Heart Lung machine, some of the vital equipments necessary to start Open Heart Surgery Unit were donated by St. Vincent’s Hospital, Portland, Oregon.

“My genuine intentions were rewarded. We acquired the machine, though from a different source. Lady Luck did not forsake me. Earl Mayer Chiles, the President of Chiles Foundation and Fred Mayor group of companies arranged to transport the equipments free of cost and they reached Madras on 8th March 1987 my birthday”, he recalls.

When Dr. Cherian returned, he was delighted that the Heart-Lung machine had already reached Madras.

Just as the old king Melchizedek says in the novel Alchemist, “When you want something, all the Universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.”

Dr. Cherian felt this. He says, “Life is beautiful if one dares to dream and is ready to chase it irrespective of the types of challenges thrust upon one.”

— The writer is Director of X Factor Group of companies

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“Stop terrorism. Love others. Learn from India”

CHITRA BASKAR

On 1 July 2016, 21:20 local time, five militants opened fire on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Gulshan, Thana, an affluent area with many embassies in Dhaka, Bangladesh. 29 people were killed and there was a security lock down in the country.

Kulsuma, a Bangladeshi, was oblivious to all this however as she was fighting a heart problem on her sixteenth birthday.

Dr. Cherian had performed an open-heart surgery on her when Kulsuma was just a year old. She had enjoyed a normal life since then. At 16, her health problem returned with vomiting and breathlessness. Her parents took her back to Chennai.

Tests revealed that she needed another surgery and a valve replacement. Though worried, being in the safe hands of the Frontier Lifeline team gave them peace. The surgery date was fixed. The father returned to Bangladesh to arrange funds while Kulsuma and her mother remained in Chennai.

However, even after three days, the money was not transferred and the father could not be contacted! Frontier Lifeline contacted the Bangladesh bank. They learnt that due to terrorist activity all foreign transactions were frozen in Bangladesh.

After two more days the worried mother contacted Kulsuma’s brother in Bangladesh. He was shocked to learn of his father’s disappearance and was desperately trying to trace him when he received a call from his father. Trying to carry cash to India, he had been arrested on suspicion of being a terrorist and his mobile had been seized. He somehow managed to get another mobile to contact his son. On hearing this news, Kulsuma and her mother broke down at the hospital reception.

It was here that Dr. Cherian found them. On learning about their dire predicament, he took charge.

Dr. Cherian takes charge Once

Dr Cherian got personally involved, the women knew everything would be alright. Dr. Cherian was highly respected in Dhaka as he had performed Dhaka’s first open heart surgery. He had inaugurated the National Institute of Cardio-Vascular Disease and the Open Heart Surgery Department there. He had also been honored by the Health Minister of Bangladesh for his great service.

Dr. Cherian’s secretary Ms. Cheryl contacted the medical community and the Health Ministry of Bangladesh. She sent the relevant documents authenticating the father’s claim. Kulsuma’s father was immediately released and his cash was returned. Kulsuma had a successful surgery the next day.

While returning to Bangladesh a week later she said, “I am eternally grateful to the entire hospital team, especially Dr. Cherian. On the operation table, when I saw Dr. Cherian with his mask, my sick heart grew peaceful. I knew I was going to be well. I felt it was a divine connection between us. Today, I am going home to a new life with a new valve. I will spread the message of love and acceptance I learnt here.”

— The writer is Director of X Factor Group of companies

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Stay Alert... Always!

“To be aware, you need to be quiet inside. A high degree of alertness is required. Be Still. Look. Listen. Be Present.” — Eckart Tolle

CHITRA BASKAR

One early morning in 1977, Dr. Cherian’s team at the Railway Hospital Cardio Thoracic Department was suddenly alerted to a patient being brought back to the operation theatre from the post-operative ward. His abdomen was bloated like a balloon, he was as pale as a sheet and his pulse was fast with blood pressure dropping alarmingly.

Dr. Cherian diagnosed the condition as internal bleeding. This was in stark contrast to the jubilant situation just hours earlier.

52 year old Mohammed Kunju from Kasergode, North Kerala had been suffering from an Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm, a dangerous condition which could burst anytime leading to death. The corrective surgery was resection of the aneurysm and replacing it with a tube graft, while bypassing the aneurismal abdominal aorta connecting to both groin arteries. The surgery for Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm was new to many of the hospitals in South India and was only being performed occasionally in Mumbai by Dr. P.K. Sen, Dr. G.B. Parulkar and their team at King Edward Medical College Hospital. It was a risky procedure but critical to survival.

This procedure required the ‘Dacron’ tube graft with 2 limbs which was not available in Chennai. Dr. Cherian’s research led him to a source in Mumbai through the advice of Dr. Parulkar and Dr. Pandey. They helped him procure the graft from their contacts in Mumbai.

The graft was made from a special type of polyester (Dacron) which allowed blood to ooze out, but it had to be soaked in the patient’s own blood to seal it. The surgery began in the morning and every procedure was followed to the letter. It was successfully completed with the graft sutured in place from the abdominal aorta to serve both the legs by 7 pm, leading to relief and jubilation.

Hours later however, the patient's condition had deteriorated and he was rushed back to the operation theatre where he was thoroughly checked for the source of bleeding. When all the sutures were found to be intact, the team was stumped.

Then suddenly, Dr. Cherian had an epiphany. “I realized that the small injection prick on the major blood vessel inferior vena cava used to withdraw blood to pre-clot the graft was the source of bleeding. I immediately sutured it and the bleeding stopped.” What it required was a simple single stitch.

The patient recovered without incident and was discharged in ten days. He visited Dr. Cherian for follow up review for 3 years.

The major take-away from this event was, “Despite following every procedure to the letter, a very small oversight could have led to tragedy. A minor fault can have major consequences. We need to have a personal eye on everything as 'the devil is in details'. With no one to guide me, I had no option but to learn from mistakes.”

Today, there are many regulatory bodies and multiple sets of protocols. Even then, there is no substitute for a surgeon’s alert eagle eye.

— The writer is Director of X Factor Group of companies

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If you have a financial constraint to treat your heart condition, you may contact Dr. KM Cherian Foundation for help. For details, please visit www.frontierlifeline.com.