

Prof. (Dr) M. Shantharam Shetty * - a Doyen of Orthopaedics

Interviewed by Dr Siddhartha M Shetty,



Prof. (Dr.) M. Shantharam Shetty

He is a renowned Doctor, good teacher and a good human being too. His benign presence, stately bearing, innate simplicity, vast erudition and benevolent guidance to all his students and peers in the medical field something to be experienced. An avid lover of sports, good orator and was a talented sportsman throughout his school and university career. He believes in the dictum that “knowledge is power and with the power comes responsibility”. In Prof. Dr. M Shantharam Shetty, I found as Max Lucado put it, that “the people who make a difference are not the ones with the credentials, but the ones with the concern”. “...I do not preach what I do not

Prof. (Dr.) M. Shantharam Shetty,
Pro Chancellor, Nitte University,
Chairman, Tejasvini Hospital & SSIOT,
Adjunct Professor, The T N Dr. MGR Medical University,
AO Trustee 2006-11 and Past Chairman AO Trauma India
Council,
Past President, Indian Orthopaedic Association

practice; practice what you preach” says Dr. Shetty. “...seen the transformation of orthopaedics SP Nails Plate to PFN A2 from excision arthroplasty of hip to most sophisticated modular, hybrid hips, from arthrodesis knee to high flexed knees, open menisectomy to arthroscopic meniscal repair to regenerative therapy.” Dr. Shetty continues “... Change is a natural phenomenon. An arm chair surgeon has no role to play in the present arena of constant development and learning. A learner will have time and means to learn, a lazy person will have only excuses”.

Excerpts from an Interview:

Question 1: You hail from a bunt family from the undivided district of Dakshina Kannada in Karnataka. The family was predominantly agrarian and your upbringing in a joint family. How do you recollect the times during schooling which was also the time when challenging without India achieved its freedom.

I was lucky to be born in an illustrious Bunt Family. I was born in the famous Moodlakatte House - my grandfather's house known for its architectural heritage where the famous Rekha's picture 'Utsav' was filmed- and spent some time in my mother's place Molahalli another prominent Bunt House-both with large land holding. It is well said birth is an accident, life is a journey and death is reality. I was fortunate to be born as the son of a father, who was one of the first agricultural graduates of our

community, and mother a true home maker, who looked after her children well with all sincerity and purpose. I was again lucky that my father- a government servant- was posted to Mangalore where we have thereafter settled permanently. I had the privilege of schooling in St. Aloysius School, which had the best of sports facilities, debating and cultural fests and more than that, all teachers were indeed admirable. They chiselled us in discipline, academics, sports and cultural activities. I am beholden to this school. One incidence which I should mention here is how Principals or teachers can mend ones thinking in life. My Principal Rev. Fr. Betram Sequiera made this impact on me. One of my classmates John was caught smoking by his mother. She came to Principal and asked him to advise or punish John and see that John does not smoke. Father Betram asked her to come on 1st of succeeding month. The same reply was repeated 3 times and at the end of 4th month, Fr. Betram simply called John and his mother and told him how bad smoking was and cajoled him to stop smoking. John's mother was astonished and asked-“Father, just to say this, you took 3 months and I am afraid John was smoking all the time”. Dear Lady, father said-“... I must confess, I was myself smoking all the time and it took me 3 months to stop smoking, now I have stopped smoking. I did not want to preach what I do not practise; practise what you preach” – a great lesson in my life.

About freedom and Independence, Yes, I was 5 year old when we were

proclaimed an independent nation. We were in Kasargod, on 15th of August 1947, there was a grand scale celebration in the public maidan. I was 5 years old. My father was a government official and we were seated in a specially erected enclosure. They were distributing laddoos and I put forward my left hand I got a laddoo, mischievous as I was, I put forward my right hand hiding my left hand and I got one more laddoo. I asked my father will it be like this hereafter. My father said yes, it will be like this, provided you work for it. Yes, my country and countrymen have been extremely kind to me I got almost whatever I asked for, dreamt of, and aspired to be in my country. Unfortunately, all are not fortunate as me and my heart bleeds for them, many a times.

Question 2: The city of Mangalore is world renowned as a seat of education; it is well recognised in the field of Health care because of the various medical institutes and excellent other related healthcare facilities. The city has been recognised among the orthopaedic fraternity in India and abroad all because of your contribution. Sir, so how did this journey in orthopaedics begin?

Yes, Mangalore I consider the paradise on earth, not that it has given me basic education and of course now livelihood, but it has given me friends whom I knew not, brothers out of strangers, love and understanding. With just a population of 5 lakh which has almost remained stagnant- perhaps the only city to be like that. It has 7 Medical Colleges, cradle of 5 nationalised banks; the famous Udupi cuisines of Dosa and Vada, all have their roots here. Moreover, in every field of human endeavour, there is a Mangalorean, who has made a name for herself/himself in every field he/she is into including film industry. As regards Mangalore being

considered as a city for orthopaedic teaching and clinical practice, yes- we were the first in India to start a PG Orthopaedic course and all my colleagues have maintained high ethical, innovative and the latest techniques in the practise of orthopaedic surgery. The number of orthopaedic conferences at the state, national and international level, vouches for the same.

Question 3 : How was it that you decided to become a doctor and take up orthopaedics as a speciality? What was the inspiration to move away from the comforts of the home to Mysore medical college for the MBBS and later to Delhi for orthopaedic training?

How I became a doctor is purely by accident and luck. I wanted to be a lawyer. I was a good debater in my school days. When I passed my SSLC and wanted to take up Arts, it was my mother who coaxed me and said “son my dream is to see you as a doctor”. My mother was everything to me. In PUC, I did not do well, but our Bunt Community was categorised/grouped as backward community in that particular year and thus I got a seat in Govt. Medical College, Mysore. It was pure destiny and my good fortune that my community was categorised as backward and after 4 years, it was again categorised as forward community. Once I got in to Medicine, I wanted to make the best use of it though the dictum says; you should not take up anything which you do not want to. I believe in the philosophy that it is some unseen power- we all call him God -does everything for us what is best. It is for us to take the call and go further, and I always did that when the door of opportunity taps on your door, it should be our endeavour to open it and work on it.

It was in the final year- watching Dr. M.Y Rai, a disciplinarian, who had just come back after doing FRCS, M.Ch,

Liverpool, his classes were fascinating– I tagged on to him, worked with him in Bangalore as Lecturer in Orthopaedics and when I secured a seat for MS (Orth) in Delhi, I also had the job offer from Canada in a small hospital. I sought his advice as to what I should do. He just said, “..resign, pack up and join your post graduation studies at Delhi though I will miss you as a junior”. That was the best advice I got. If I had gone to Canada, perhaps, I would have ended up as a G P and never would have the fascination of Orthopaedic Surgery in my life.

Question 4: You have decided to return to Mangalore to practice orthopaedics and at that time it would have been difficult as an orthopaedic surgeon to establish or to practice the art and provide the best care. How did you begin your professional career as the infrastructure and amenities would have been inadequate?

Again, after M.S Orth in Delhi, working as a post graduate and resident under Dr. Balu Sankaran a doyen in orthopaedics, I was planning to go to Australia. I had applied for a visa. At that point in time, Dr. TMA Pai, a visionary and architect of Manipal, was on a visit to Delhi and I happened to meet him since my father was closely associated with him. He simply asked me to go over to Mangalore and he would give me a job there. Coming to Mangalore was a dream come true. I loved Mangalore. I started my career as Asst. Professor in Orthopaedics. Dr. Ramanna was the Head of the Dept. of Orthopaedics. Then, orthopaedics was part of General Surgeon's domain and as such, it was under them. There were doyens like Dr. M P Pai, Dr. M V Shetty, and Dr. Venkat Rao who all were practising orthopaedics. But, having worked with Dr. Balu Sankaran, who was a surgical master craftsman, I made my way by sheer hard work. I had under

me, 30 beds and just one Asst. Surgeon to assist me. We had 2 units and almost every night, I used to be in Government Wenlock Hospital attending to emergencies. Govt. Wenlock Hospital was one of the best government hospitals of the state, but to get an x-ray in the night was a struggle due to lack of technicians, meagre theatre staff and poor implants and an old hand drill. Dr. Ramanna and I bought our own set of instruments and operated at Wenlock. Imagine the difficulties in getting a theatre mobile x-ray- while doing an SP nails those days – since the radiology x-ray washing room was 2 floors down. If guide wires fail to be in place desperation would set in. Imagine doing an internal fixation of both bones forearm in those thin ladies with a Sherman Plate with a hand drill. But, those were challenging days when the patients used to have full faith in us. The pleasure was love of work. Do your duty and leave the rest to God. Yes, God indeed used to heal the wounds and fractures united, we were only messengers. Dr. Ramanna, my HOD, left for US in search of greener pastures after 3 years. I had made my impact by then and I was made the Head of Orthopaedics Department. We started MS (Orthopaedics) in the same year and I had the distinction of continuing as the HOD for next 24 years. It was all God's will again. We used to have M S Exams once in Manipal and once in Mangalore. Dr. V. Chacko was the chief at Manipal. Dr. N. Natarajan (senior), Dr. Vyagreshwarudu, Dr. Tarapurwala and Dr. Ethirajulu were some of the external examiners. It was a privilege to have been a co-examiner with them.

Question 5 : The medical education

in India has been constantly changing and upgrading itself. You have seen it evolve and adapt, these changes, you have experienced as a student then as faculty in Kasturba Medical College and later as you were Dean of K S Hegde Medical Academy and Vice Chancellor of Nitte deemed to be university. Initially, it produced family doctors and later specialisation became the norm and today super specialisation and subspecialisation is the way all are pursuing medicine.

So, where do you see the medical education is heading for?

Yes. My greatest asset in my life has been luck but luck always comes to those who work for it. I had seen the transformation of orthopaedics from SP Nails Plate to PFN A2 from excision arthroplasty of hip to most sophisticated modular, hybrid hips, from arthrodesis knee to high flexed, uni and modified condylar knees, open menisectomy to arthroscopic meniscal repair to regenerative therapy. Well, my generation has undergone great transformation. Even now, I attend at least five to six conferences, be a faculty or as a participant in different parts of the country and abroad. As far as medical education is concerned, I must admit that the quality of present day teachers compared with that of the earlier years, I am sorry to say it has left much to be desired. They need to attach importance to clinical assessment, history, clinical signs and even planning. I think our basic medical education, no doubt, should involve the latest of the bio technological pursuits, but patient is a human being with a heart, soul and a family behind. If only a surgeon sees his brother or sister in his patients, that would be ultimate training. My only guilt is that I have only 75 publications, I could have

done much better with the clinical materials and the resources I had.

Question 6: You have achieved excellence in orthopaedics through hard work with tenacity of purpose which is very hard to replicate, you were President of the IOA, you have been trustee of the AO INDIA, and you are part of SICOT and various other national and international bodies. All these bodies hugely benefitted with your contribution. It will be very nice to know as how you challenge yourself to take up such initiatives and contribute so much time and effort to such associations?

Yes. I was lucky again. I was the AO Trustee, I was the first AO Trauma India Council Chairman, I was elected the State, South Indian and finally the IOA President. My colleagues were kind to me. All these posts gave me enough opportunity to update my knowledge which I could use to treat my patients and transfer the knowledge to my students. Teaching is my obsession, but once I became an administrator as Dean, it fascinated me and somehow I found time for my clinical practise, teaching and administration. It was tough to balance and do justices to all, but I feel, if there is a will, there is a way.

Question 7: The Lions club of Mangalore has been a great beneficiary due to your association with it and in promoting its social cause. You were instrumental as Governor of Lions club in establishing, one of its kind, in south Karnataka the Lions artificial limb Centre. You also were instrumental in establishing Lions blood bank and relentlessly took up various socially relevant initiatives to help the disabled and the needy. Your humble

approach and the infectious smile kept up the spirits of your associates in this endeavour to deliver the best to the needy, in a very affordable manner. How did you come up with such interesting projects and which of those have been your cherished one?

In Lions organization, I was elected unanimously as the Governor in 1994; I have been a member of this organization for the last 45 years. Lions Club has given me an opportunity to do whatever social service and community obligations I had to give back to the society what society has given me. I have been looking after the Lions Artificial Limb Centre for the last 40 years in Government Wenlock hospital through which we have supplied more than 85,000 artificial appliances to the challenged disabled persons. I was instrumental in starting the Lions Tejasvini Blood Bank and the Lions Tejasvini Dialysis Centre, and the Lions Vocational Centre which are doing good human work. I also started the Dakshina Kannada physically handicapped association in 1984 with just 60 members. Today, it has 5000 members who are getting support from government to be independent as far as possible. All these projects have given me immense pleasure and peace.

Question 8: Orthopaedics specialty has been involving itself with the latest development in field of technology, by adopting computer navigation, robotics and artificial intelligence and also benefitting from these developments in metallurgy and polymer science. There has been a better understanding of human basic sciences, and it has brought in stem cell therapy and gene therapy, hence

able to offer the best treatment options with better outcomes. And, research has played pivotal role. In today's world, there is a constant urge to know the latest and try to incorporate it in practice and you have always been in the forefront in bringing it into practice and also conducting research.

How important is it for everyone who is part of orthopaedics to constantly involve in research and stay abreast with the developments and be open to the thought of adopting such practices?

Yes. Orthopaedics surgery amongst most of the branches of medicine has evolved tremendously mainly because of technology and Biological evolution. The robotics, better understanding of metals, computerization, arthroscopic evolution, gene and stem cell therapy have made the surgeons job more challenging, demanding, but at the same time easier. Change is a natural phenomenon. An arm chair surgeon has no role to play in the present arena of constant development and learning. A learner will have time and means to learn, a lazy person will have only excuses.

Question 9: Your family has successively produced doctors for three generations including you, your three daughters and your grandchild; you surely played a role which has influenced their decision to become a doctor. You lead a very hectic professional life as Pro Chancellor of Nitte Deemed to be university and as Chairman of the Tejasvini Hospital and SSIOT which is leading orthopaedic specialty hospital with DNB post graduate training being imparted, how do you divide time between family and professional life?

Yes. For anyone to be successful, a

good loving family is a must. God has blessed me with an understanding wife who waits for me till 12 midnight to serve dinner and again the working wheel starting at 8.00 AM. This, we have been doing for the last 50 years of our marriage. The sacrifices my wife and children and other family members, especially my parents, made me what I am today. I thank Almighty for this in my everyday prayer. My 3 daughters never used to sleep till I come home and always we ate our dinner together. Every Sunday was a family day and each one of us looked upon for this day for an outing either for an evening Dosa outing or a dinner. It is great to have daughters, they are loving and understanding. Yes, all my three daughters have become doctors. They scored well in PUC, but it was the courtesy and good will of Dr. T. Ramdas Pai and Mrs. Vasanthi Pai that all my 3 daughters could study at KMC and have become super specialists in the fields of Medicine. KMC had a staff quota then and we are grateful to the magnanimity of the management. My life has been hectic almost 14 hours a day of work, but it has kept me going. I am afraid to retire, I can't imagine myself remain idle. Period prior to and after the Conferences every time has been my holidays with my wife and children. When they were young, once a year we used to go on a holiday – they loved and longed for it.

Question 10: What is your favourite hobby or anything that you would like to do to unwind or relax?

My hobby is to read and write whenever I find time. To watch cricket or tennis matches, I know every cricket player and tennis star by name and their achievements, from Ken Rosewall to Roger Federer

in tennis and from Vijay Hazare to Virat Kohli in cricket.

Question 11: With more than 45 years of experience in Professional life, with many award and recognitions which have been bestowed on you for your dedication and service to the humanity. Which one would you rate the most memorable one and the closest to your heart and why?

Yes. I have received innumerable awards from our own country and abroad, from Lions Club to Government and premier agencies. But, I place the recent Golden Jubilee IOA Oration Award as the most precious one. I worked for it, competed for it and won it and delivered the oration. One of my senior colleagues and friend was astonished that at my age and position as pro Chancellor of a University, I submitted the oration

to be judged and awarded amongst more than 10 submissions from different parts of the country. I always like challenges.

Question 12: You have essayed numerous roles in your professional life, as a student, teacher, administrator, leader among equals, a healer and many more.

What role gave you satisfaction and happiness?

What role would you like to be remembered for?

What would be your message for the future?

Every role that I played in my life has given me immense satisfaction as a teacher, as a surgeon, an administrator and as a humble community worker each as important as the other. It is futile to gauge, since in life each one is as important as the other.

My message to the future:

Work hard – there is no alternative to working, but work with love and satisfaction.

Don't be after money; money automatically comes to you if you work sincerely, ethically and with love and compassion. God's blessings, family support and support of students and colleagues and community at large are vital for growth and peace.

* Prof. (Dr.) M. Shantharam Shetty, Pro Chancellor, Nitte University, Chairman, Tejasvini Hospital & SSIOT, Adjunct Professor, The T N Dr. MGR Medical University, AO Trustee 2006-11 and Past Chairman AO Trauma India Council, Past President, Indian Orthopaedic Association

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