In Memoriam

Remembering Kanu Chatterjee
A Gentle Giant of Cardiology

Prediman K. Shah, MD; William Parmley, MD; Donald Heistad, MD

On March 4, 2015, Kanu Chatterjee, MBBS, a beloved physician, cardiologist, healer, teacher, and charismatic mentor, passed away peacefully in Iowa City, Iowa, after a brief battle with cancer. His passing has created an irretrievable loss for the field of cardiovascular medicine, because he was the essence of a clinician-teacher-investigator. Kanu was soft-spoken, kind, and wise; he was a practitioner of extraordinary skill, and spiritual. We were privileged to know this gentle giant of cardiology.

Dr Kanu Chatterjee was born in Bangladesh, India, and received his medical degree from the R. G. Kar Medical College, Calcutta, India, while still living in a refugee camp in Calcutta. He moved to England in 1963, where he completed additional training in medicine and cardiology at St. George’s Hospital and the Royal Brompton Hospital, earning membership in the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and London. Kanu rapidly established his reputation as a brilliant clinical cardiologist.

In 1970, at the urging of 2 cardiologists at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center (Howard Allen, MD, and Harvey Alpern, MD, whom he met at St. Georges Hospital in London) as well as Graham Miller, PhD, of London, H. J. C. Swan, MD, then the director of cardiology at Cedars-Sinai, recruited Kanu to join the Division of Cardiology and eventually run the coronary care unit and the National Institutes of Health–sponsored Myocardial Infarction Research Unit at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. During his 4-year tenure at Cedars-Sinai, Kanu achieved a mythical status as a dedicated, hardworking, and brilliant clinician with outstanding bedside diagnostic skills and great empathy for his patients. Around that time, the Swan-Ganz catheter was introduced into clinical medicine, and Kanu published several seminal papers on the hemodynamic spectrum in acute myocardial infarction and heart failure.

In 1975, Dr Chatterjee moved to the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) with his longtime friend and colleague, Bill Parmley, MD, who had also been at Cedars Sinai at that time. He left behind many fond memories and a fantastic legacy. I (P.K.S.) was most fortunate to meet this remarkable human being at UCSF in late 1975. I wanted to work with him, but in his usual selfless manner, he felt that my professional interests would be better served at Cedars-Sinai because he felt that the cardiology department at UCSF at that time was not as developed as at Cedars-Sinai. I was always thankful to Kanu for that sage advice, which shaped my own career. I was personally honored to give the inaugural Docey and Kanu Chatterjee Lecture at the Annual Scientific Sessions of the American College of Cardiology (ACC) in 2014.

Kanu continued his distinguished clinical, teaching, and investigative career at UCSF, earning numerous accolades for his role as a bedside teacher and skilled clinician. His gentle bedside manner, together with phenomenal skill in examining the patient, taught the house staff about the critical information one can obtain from a well-directed history and superb physical examination. His calm approach to teaching never threatened the house staff or others. He had an uncanny knack of gently leading the presenting physician to a correct diagnosis and treatment plan. His reputation spread, and he saw many of the rich and famous throughout the country, in addition to many from the San Francisco area. Not only did Kanu work long hours at the hospital, but he made his home phone available to patients. The Chatterjee Center for Cardiac Research and the Kanu Chatterjee Resident Education Center at UCSF Medical Center were named after him.

In 2009, Dr Chatterjee retired and moved to Iowa City, Iowa, with his wife, Docey, an Iowa native. During his retirement, he was the attending physician on a busy inpatient service, with a weekly or twice-weekly clinic (highly sought by the cardiology fellows), with clinical activities comparable to full-time faculty. He was the first Kanu and Docey Edwards Chatterjee Chair in Cardiovascular Medicine at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, Iowa City, Iowa (D.H.).

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of Iowa. Kanu also edited 2 massive—and popular—textbooks. Although he asked several colleagues to serve as coeditors, he did all of the work. Kanu also maintained contact with his patients in other cities.

Perhaps overshadowing Dr Chatterjee’s huge talents as a cardiologist and teacher was his impact as a mentor. Many of today’s leaders in cardiology are proud to say that Kanu taught them cardiology and advised them about their career. Cardiology is changing, but the art of mentoring is timeless. Kanu’s effect on his trainees will therefore make his contribution enduring.

Kanu published more than 300 papers, edited 6 books, and received numerous awards, including the prestigious 2014 Herrick Award from the American Heart Association, gifted teacher award from the ACC in 1990, and the Presidential Honor for Excellence from the ACC in 2015; alas the latter came posthumously. His numerous scientific contributions included a role in the development of vasodilator therapy for acute and chronic heart failure, defining the role of hemodynamic monitoring using the Swan-Ganz catheter in acute myocardial infarction and heart failure, and describing repolarization changes (cardiac memory) following cardiac pacing, just to name a few.

A few months before Kanu’s death, one of us (D.H.) listened to a patient’s heart, and knew that the examination required a master. We went from Kanu’s office to the patient, gathering fellows along the way. His physical examination was meticulous and leisurely (but quick) as he quietly described each finding. The patient had membranous subaortic stenosis, aortic regurgitation with an Austin-Flint murmur, and a patent ductus arteriosus. To be taught by Dr Chatterjee was memorable.

Several days before his death, a group of cardiology fellows visited him at his residence. One of the fellows told the others that Kanu was one of the world’s greatest cardiologists. Kanu quietly said, “I have no regrets. I have had a full life.” A fellow said the moment was most poignant, as the silence was deafening.

Dr Chatterjee was 81 years of age. He is survived by his wife of almost 40 years, Docey Edwards Chatterjee; his son, Suvendu Chatterjee, and daughter-in-law, Geetanjali, of Delaware; his grandson, Soumendu Chatterjee; and several siblings. As Samuel Johnson said about Oliver Goldsmith, “He touched nothing that he did not adorn”.1

Reference

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