



There is nothing that can trill **Dr Pradeep Chowbey** as much as conducting surgeries. He is always looking to innovate

BY RAELENE KAMBLI

From passionately performing minimal access surgery and breaking records to training practitioners and being a part of the core team in formulating guidelines and recommendations for minimal access surgery Dr Pradeep Chowbey, Executive Vice-Chairman, Max Healthcare and Director, Max Institute of Minimal Access, Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery, Saket, New Delhi (India), is much at ease in the OT as in his office.

The journey from Jabalpur Medical College to Max Institute of Minimal Access and Metabolic Surgery illustrates his sheer determination and adherence towards his vocation. A Padma Shri from the President of India, a Bharat Jyoti award in 2006, Indira Gandhi Priyadarshini Award for Excellence in



the field of laparoscopic surgery, a Gem of India Award, Arya Award for most compassionate doctor, and many more such prestigious honours now adorn Dr Chowbey's mantelpiece. He is the first doctor to perform laparoscopic cholecystectomy in North India.

Along with his team, Dr Chowbey has performed more than 60,000 minimal access surgeries between 1992-2013 and features in the Guinness Book of Records 1997 and the Limca Book of Records in consecutive editions 2000 - 2014. He had the honour of operating on his holiness, The Dalai Lama in October 2008 and the President of India, K R Narayanan in March 2001. Moreover, Dr Chowbey is one of the first surgeons to recognise and acknowledge the increasing prevalence of obesity in India. His deepened understanding and tenacity bore fruit with a large number of patients benefiting from bariatric surgery.

What turns our spotlight on Dr Chowbey is not only his success, but his experience that spells out different phases of his life that has brought about a revolution in the filed of laparoscopy and minimal access surgeries. He has graphed his career with a single vision to develop, evaluate and propagate minimal access, metabolic and bariatric surgery in India.

Early life and vocation

Delving into his life story, one can understand that Dr Chowbey is grounded by his roots. His child life was spent picking up lesson from his father, who in those days was the only surgeon in



R-L: Dr Chowbey with R K Narayan, ex-president

their neighbourhood. As a child, he has gone through the ups and downs of living a small town. He studied at a municipality school that functioned by spreading out taat patti on the floor. Having books was not possible. They used a small slate and chalk to write. Recalling memories of his childhood days, he says, "We come from a small town called Burhanpur in Madhya Pradesh and my childhood was full of fond memories of spending time with my father who was the only qualified surgeon in the area, respected and loved by everyone. I always wanted to follow suit. I spent many hours in his dispensary, helping him make mixtures in small pudiyas (pouches) which is how medicine used to be in those days. One advice that I hold close to my heart is to never forget who has helped you and to not remember those who hurt you. Following this path, I have always managed to simplify relations and move on with a positive outlook towards life."

Growing up having his father as his role model, Dr Chowbey chose to walk on his footsteps and went on to study medicine at Jabalpur Medical College.

After completing this medical education, he moved to Delhi to find a job. Moving from a smaller town to a metropolitan city like New Delhi was a big step for anyone at that time. His first job was in 1977 as a registrar at the Holy Family Hospital that catered to the upper classes, elite families and

patients from the embassies. Working at the hospital was very much a cultural shock for him. There, he worked for almost two years, gathered a phenomenal amount of exposure and learnings that he cherishes even today.

Moving on, in 1984, he joined Sir Ganga Ram Hospital as a consultant surgeon. During this period, his field of interest was haepatobiliary, pancreatic and breast surgery. However, all through his blossoming surgical career, there remained a large void within him for his inability to alleviate post-operative sufferings from large surgical incisions. Surgical cure was being obtained at the cost of tremendous postoperative pain and suffering to the patient.

Few years later in 1989, Dr Chowbey attended a presentation at the American College of Surgeons in New Orleans that focused on endoscopic gall bladder surgery. That was the turning point in his career. "It almost instantly changed the path of my career, exploring something new and challenging. Initially it was thought to be a surgery for the upper class, but I always believed that it was a surgery for the masses in India who survive on daily wages. With a quick recovery time and less post-operative care, the patient could resume work within a matter of a few days as opposed to the previous recovery time of close to a month, this would in turn, cut down the suffering of the family simultane-



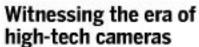
Operating on the Dalai Lama was one of my most exciting and satisfying experience.We achieved the highest possible success rate with excellent clinical outcomes

ously. Bringing this procedure to the country not only changed my life, but countess others," he acknowledges.

So was this a tough call? "Shifting my area of speciality from the drastic and destructive surgeries in hopes of curing cancer to the gentle and kind cuts of laparoscopic surgery that causes very little pain and discomfort has been the toughest decision at the beginning of my career, but it proved to be worthwhile in the long run," he confesses.

Struggle period

Like any new idea is not easily accepted Dr Chowbey's idea of minimal incision surgery was also mocked and called impractical by many industry people. He calls to mind his struggle period and says,"In the beginning, there was a lot of resistance from the senior surgical communities, who followed a standard thinking that if a surgeon does not put both his hands inside the abdomen, there would be no successful recovery. We reversed the ideology of 'Bigger surgeons make big cuts and smaller surgeon make small cuts', even changing the cuts to mere punctures! Besides this, there was a need for very high financial investment, long training hours and a huge learning curve that changed the surgeons' outlook from the three dimensional open surgery to the two dimensions of laparoscopic surgery". Nevertheless, his toiling was over. Then began the phase where innovations brought in new learnings and there on Dr Chowbey knew he had to go on without a stop.



While he treaded on his way to success he witnessed many transitions in his field of expertise."With advances in technologies and the reducing size of punctures that we make for the procedures, one of the most important evolutions has been that of the cameras that we use. We started with poor quality of cameras, with very low resolutions and colour definitions, increasing the time





that was taken to complete one operation. But the industry kept up with the quick pace, providing us with high-resolution cameras and instruments that increased precision as and when there was an upgrade in technology. This has definitely been one of the key areas of advancements in minimal access surgeries," he informs.

As the field of minimal access surgeries advanced in India, Dr Chowbey put in his best efforts to promote this discipline of medical procedures. He tried to utilise the capacity of this technique in every possible way. "Along with cutting down recovery time of the patients, we have been successful in adding more and more surgeries in this field,

teaching with experience and increasing exposure. One of the most dramatic achievements has been the pioneering work that we have undertaken in the area of scarless neck surgery and building a team of people who believe in the results and have accepted the challenge of learning the high-tech surgery," he reveals.

Strengths, memories and more...

Well, hardwork always pays well. Today, with so many records and reward in his kitty, Dr Chowbey exemplifies modern day medical sciences worldwide. At the same time, the stardom he has earned does not cajole him at all. He still remains humble and warmhearted.

How does he manage to stay composed? "Records and achievements are all recognitions that have come along the way, but the crux of it all lies in hard work, with firm foundations on being grounded. Even though the recognition and success is important, it is more important to remember the efforts that go behind it, making it easy to maintain the composure at the end of the day," he replies.

Albeit that rewards and recongnitions wont flatter Dr Chowbey, it can certainly cause some constriction in order to keep up to goodwill earned so far. "Contrary to what one



L-R: Dr Chowbey with The Dalai Lama

might believe, for some unknown reason there was very little anxiety in operating His Holiness the Dalai Lama, it was in fact one of the most exciting and satisfying experience. We achieved the highest possible success rate with excellent clinical outcomes, unmatched in the surgical field. Since he is considered to be an incarnation, it was like operating on God!", he negates the possibility of any kind constriction.

So, what's his best prize in life? Surprisingly, its just a smile on his patient's face. "Seeing the patients smiling a few hours after complex surgeries and going back to their families and workplace with minimum suffering after major procedures is one of the most rewarding experiences.

Talking about some special memories, he shares an anecdote. "It would have to be following strict protocols while operating the then serving President of India, KR Narayanan who was in his early 80s, with quite a few comorbid conditions and difficult complex diseases. An extremely soft and generous person, as a gesture after recovery he invited team members and greeted them at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, from the lift-operator to the top consultants, making it an evening we cherish to date", he recalls.

When asked about his hobbies and fascinations, he told us that he unwinds from his hectic schedule usually in the presence of art, either by attending an exhibition or by spending an evening with an artist. " I always find time to pursue my love for art", he concedes.

Vision for the tomorrow

Going forward, what does Dr Chowbey aspire of? He says, "I desire to create a dedicated centre for highest standards of training and teaching for the younger generation of surgeons, with all the modern facilities and latest technologies that would aide for a better quality of learning".

Moreover, as an industry leader, he shares a word of advice to the industry and policy makers saying, "The healthcare industry in India should try and keep pace with developments that take place. They should spend time and concentrate on putting in more efforts in research and development so as to provide us with safer equipment and instruments. Also, we are already catching up with the world in the area of healthcare, but there is a lack of competency and integrity in the doctors that needs to be increased in degree along with a plan to provide affordable medical care without the compromise of quality. Finally, We need to develop more hospitals, starting from prioritising their need in tier-II cities and then moving onwards to the villages in a systematic manner, while keeping in mind a need to maintain quality in each and every setup".

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