Parveen Kumar: Pet hate is arrogance

In this series the BMJ asks the movers and shakers of the medical world about work, life, and less serious matters.

What was your earliest ambition?
As far back as I can remember I have always wanted to be a doctor, as the discipline encompassed science and caring for patients. Luckily, I got into medical school.

Who has been your biggest inspiration?
My mother. She was a remarkable lady. She inculcated in me the principles of hard work, honesty, and “giving.” Anything was possible, even as a woman! Her “giving” and voluntary work lasted to the end of her days. I have this vision of a tiny 80 year old Indian lady in a sari (hitched up over snow boots) delivering meals on wheels to elderly people in a Surrey town. I always wondered what the locals must have thought of her.

What was the worst mistake in your career?
My first liver biopsy in the days of “see one, do one, teach one.” I was supposedly being supervised by my registrar, who kept telling me to go “lower and lower” while chatting to the nurses. The patient was absolutely lovely, giving me encouragement. The histology, however, came back as showing kidney, intestine, gall bladder, and a tiny bit of liver—a rissole! As the only woman on the gastro unit for many, many years I could never live this down.

What was your best career move?
As my career was so unplanned, I don’t think there was one “best” move. However, my gastroenterology training under Anthony Dawson and Michael Clark was inspirational and gave me a superb and solid basis in research and clinical practice. Mike was my research supervisor and a very hard task master. However, this training has helped me throughout my medical career. I enjoyed everything I did and still think the NHS is terrific, after working in it for 44 years. I always loved getting out of bed to go to work.

Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?
The best were probably Frank Dobson (he always listened) and Steven Dorrell (for clarity of thought). You knew they were trying to make things better and had a vision of what should be done for patients. There are many candidates for the worst; it must be a difficult job to do, but some were delivering government imperatives for quick wins, with little thought for the long term consequences for patients or healthcare professionals.

Who is the person you would most like to thank and why?
My late husband, David Leaver, who was a respiratory physician. David supported me throughout my career but particularly at a time when there were very few women in medicine. He encouraged me to do my MD. My boss had said I didn’t need it, as I was a woman . . . which, of course, was like a red rag to a bull.

To whom would you most like to apologise?
My daughters. I stole time from them when they were quite young to write a textbook over evenings, weekends, and holidays.

If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?
After providing for the education of my grandchildren, I would give it to charities working with people unfortunate enough to have been born in places with poor sanitation and a shortage of food. I would also spend some on taking educational programmes to countries, depending on what they wanted.
Biography
Parveen Kumar, a gastroenterologist and professor at Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, is blessed by generations of medical students as co-editor and founder (with Michael Clark) of Kumar and Clark’s Clinical Medicine, now in its eighth edition. The book, thrice winner of the BMA book awards, shook the dust off the dry tomes that Kumar had to endure when she qualified in medicine at Barts in the mid-1960s. She has held many posts in medicine and medical education, including chairing the Medicines Commission UK and serving as president of the BMA in 2006 and of the Royal Society of Medicine in 2010-12.

Where are or were you happiest?
With my husband on the top of a mountain with a bottle of claret, a superlative view, and the sound of the whistling wind.

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?
In gastroenterology it must be the discovery of Helicobacter pylori. Having played around fruitlessly measuring acid in the stomach as a registrar, I would never have believed that ulcers were caused by a bug. Of course, endoscopy has made a difference overall, but not quite like H pylori.

Do you believe in doctor assisted suicide?
No—this would be against the tenets of being a doctor. I have watched patients die and, I hope, have been there for them, but I could not take a life. I have seen the “hopeless case” patient recover briefly enough to have good times with children and family. Each case is different, so it would be difficult to control.

What book should every doctor read?
The Diving Bell and the Butterfly by Jean-Dominique Bauby. It is the heart wrenching tale of the thoughts of a man with locked-in syndrome, seeing his children but being unable to hug or speak to them. It was written painstakingly by the author using the blink of an eyelid. Every medical student should read it. Of course, every student and doctor should also read Kumar and Clark’s Clinical Medicine, but I might be slightly biased.

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?
I would like an operatic love duet. However, as presumably I would not be listening, I would suggest that the congregation go out singing with the energetic enthusiasm of Louis Armstrong and his band. Perhaps both?

What is your most treasured possession?
My wonderful family, although they are not really a possession.

What personal ambition do you still have?
I would love to do something that really makes a difference. I get very emotional when I see the inequalities among people across the world, particularly in low and middle income countries.

Summarise your personality in three words
Enthusiastic, committed, intensely loyal. However, a person who later became a friend when asked why I had got a job said of me: “Very intelligent, has gravitas, but, above all, is enormous fun.” I am still having fun.

Where does alcohol fit into your life?
Daily, preferably a glass of good claret. I can do without alcohol among non-drinking friends, but not for too long.

What is your pet hate?
I have two. Firstly, PCism. Being politically correct about some ridiculous things can be most unhelpful; why can’t we just tell the truth? My second hate is arrogance among doctors, but I hope this has almost disappeared in our profession.

What would be on the menu for your last supper?
Well, for once no one will be talking about a healthy diet. So, seared scallops, a fillet steak, chips, and a good bottle of claret. I just hope my taste buds will still be tuned to perfection.

Do you have any regrets about becoming a doctor?
None whatsoever. I have loved every minute of it. However, I probably wouldn’t get into medical school now, as it is so competitive.

If you weren’t in your present role what would you be doing instead?
Not sure. I have always wanted to be a doctor. I used to say, jokingly, that if I didn’t get into medical school I would become an air hostess, so I could travel. I suspect I would have been pretty useless at that.

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