

## Brigadier (Dr.) Harjinder Singh Bhatoe: We Learned Spine Surgery From



Brigadier (Dr.) Harjinder Singh Bhatoe

### INTRODUCTION

At the time of independence in 1947, when some visionaries such as Prof. B Ramamurthi and Prof. Jacob Chandy got busy in establishing neurosurgery as a specialty in India, Armed Forces Medical Services already had a functioning neurosurgical unit headed by Colonel AC Ray. Neurosurgery in the Armed Forces took firm roots due to the grit and determination of early pioneers such as Brig Mahender Singh and later by Brig Chandrika Prasad Bajpayee and Colonel Vijay Sagar Madan. Further consolidation and growth occurred with mentoring of new crop of surgeons who volunteered for neurosurgery. Brig Bhatoe is one of those in whom a spark for neurosurgery was lit by titans of neurosurgery in army.

### BRIGADIER (DR.) HARJINDER SINGH BHATOE

Brig Bhatoe was born on November 10, 1956 at Mhow (Madhya Pradesh) in a family with army service as a tradition. He received his early education in St. Mary's High School Mhow and finished his Higher Secondary school from Kendriya Vidyalaya, Jalandhar Cantonment. His childhood ambition of joining the army as a doctor was realized when he joined the prestigious Armed Forces Medical College, Pune in 1974. He graduated in 1978, and sometime in his final professional, he got a glimpse of spine surgery under the renowned Orthopedic Surgeon, Col Amarjit Singh Chahal. Col Chahal was instrumental in establishing a Spine Center at Military

Hospital, Khadki (close to Pune) where soldiers with spine trauma and other spinal problems were treated. Brig Bhatoe carefully preserved this aptitude for learning about spine problems, as he navigated through his service as a regimental medical officer with the parachute brigade and later with the President's Bodyguard, New Delhi.

He joined the postgraduation course in General Surgery at Army Hospital Delhi Cantonment (under Delhi University) in May 1984. Here, he once again worked under Col Madan, who further fuelled his desire to go for neurosurgery. His first independent spine surgery was in 1987, when at Military hospital, Leh as a general surgeon, he did a costotransversectomy and decompression in a patient with tuberculous cold abscess with paraplegia. The patient recovered completely neurologically, postoperatively.

He was granted study leave for 24 months by the army to pursue postdoctoral course in neurosurgery. He joined Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh in January 1990. After completing Magister Chirurgica (M Ch) under Professor Vijay Kumar Kak, he rejoined army duties in January 1992. Thereafter, he immersed himself completely into learning and perfecting cranial and spinal surgery, as he moved from one neurosurgery center to other as per service requirements. As a young neurosurgeon, he published papers on Diffuse Idiopathic Skeletal Hyperostosis, locked facets in cervical spine injury, epidural spinal tuberculoma, intramedullary spinal tuberculoma, and discitis.<sup>[1-4]</sup> As he grew up as a neurosurgeon, he developed special interest in craniovertebral junction anomalies.

He moved to Command Hospital (Northern command) Udhampur in 1995, where he faced the militancy-related spine trauma, as well as a large number of soldiers with intervertebral disc disease. The nearest magnetic resonance imaging center was in Amritsar. In a resource-crunched environment, he was his own radiologist, often doing myelographies and carotid angiographies himself. He started spinal fixation with Harrington Rod instrumentation and steel wires. It was in this center that he did his oft-quoted work on gunshot injuries to the spine.<sup>[5]</sup> He continued to accumulate experience in spine surgery, especially in

Pott's Spine at the center in Command Hospital (Central Command), Lucknow.

The first decade of the new millennium was a period of conceptual upheaval as well as renaissance in spine instrumentation. Armed Forces medical services did not remain untouched by change, with the availability of neuroimaging and instrumentation, and modernization of operation theatres. Army Hospital (Research and Referral) New Delhi became a leading center in spine surgery, and Brig Bhatoe became actively involved in adopting and bringing newer technologies into practice. His area of interest spanned craniovertebral junction surgery, spinal fusion techniques, cervical arthroplasty, corpectomy, and reconstruction techniques. It was in AHRR that he brought out his book on craniospinal missile injuries. This was also the time that he became the founding editor of the Indian Journal of Neurotrauma.

His next tenure as Consultant and Professor of Neurosurgery in Command Hospital (Southern command) and AFMC Pune added to his stature, as he mentored residents imparting nuances of spinal surgery to them, sharing pearls from his own experience. We, three authors of these articles, were the beneficiaries. We used to refer to him as "Big B" in our private conversations as both the Bs were doyens in their own field and commanded great respect. Evening ward rounds were sacrosanct and would be taken with faculty and residents in proper turn out. Attending at least one workshop in a year to upgrade one's skill set was mandatory for each of us. We were encouraged to publish research papers in the national and international conferences. Whenever we won any accolades in a conference, he would spread the good news about our achievements to the entire hospital staff. Wet skills laboratory was set up in AFMC during his tenure and academic activities were stream lined. Big B was a man of few words, but when he spoke, it was like cold laser, precise and left indelible impact. He would never shout at his residents. One cold look was enough to convey his point. He was very meticulous in recording and saving data of his treated patients and expected the same from his mentees. As a neurosurgeon, he laid great emphasis on physical fitness. Even after long hours of grueling surgery, we would find him exercising in gym.

At no time did he lose his poise, mental equanimity or temper with his patients. All these qualities, which we imbibed from Brig Bhatoe, have had an immense impact on us and future generations of Neurosurgeons of the Armed Forces. Working with him, we realized that regular and meticulous collection of data was very important in

undertaking any research work. Brig Bhatoe had numerous publications to his credit. Notable among them were his publications on minimally invasive transpedicular discectomy for thoracolumbar disc prolapse and missile injuries of the spine.<sup>[6,7]</sup> He attended a short fellowship in Aarhus (Denmark) on spinal deformity correction and commenced formal spinal deformity correction program in the Armed Forces. In 2011, he was awarded the prestigious Ambroise Paré Award for Combat Trauma Innovation by the International Committee for Military Medicine. As per the service requirements, he was seconded to executive cadre in 2011, when he was posted in administrative appointments. As a recognition of his distinguished service in the Indian Army, he was awarded the Chief of Army Staff Commendation twice, the General Officer Commanding-in Chief's commendation and the Vishisht Seva Medal [Figure 1].

Brig Bhatoe had a bright future as a general officer. However, he opted to stay in neurosurgery and got premature retirement in 2013 despite being approved for promotion to Major General. He worked as a chief of neurosciences at Max superspecialty Hospital PPG East Delhi and later at Fortis Hospital Noida, where he could pursue his love for neurosurgical teaching. In December 2018, he and his wife decided to move to Mohali, where he continues to head the neurosurgery unit at Max Hospital Mohali. His significant contribution to spinal surgery after his retirement from Army has been in the field of degenerative lumbar canal stenosis in elderly patients with coexistent morbidities. The results have been heartening in terms of improved the quality of life in these patients after instrumented decompression.



**Figure 1:** With President APJ Abdul Kalam at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, New Delhi

In March 2023, he published his memoirs titled “The Learning Curve,” which received positive response and rave reviews. Written from the perspective of a doctor and a neurosurgeon dealing with illnesses that require operating on the brain and spinal cord of men, women, and children and being rewarded with gratitude and ecstasy when they recovered, and a feeling of emptiness with hours and days of introspection when they did not; a reward that adds layered maturity to the own wounded psyche. It takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride of the neurosurgical career spanning more than four decades.

He and his wife, Mrs. Kulwant, live in Mohali. Their daughter Bubbles is a dental surgeon married and settled in the US.

### Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

S. K. Sengupta<sup>1,2</sup>, Shashivadhanan S<sup>2</sup>, T. J. Rappai<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Commandant, Military Hospital Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh,

<sup>2</sup>Brig, Professor and HOD, Department of Neurosurgery, Command Hospital (Southern Command), Pune, Maharashtra,

<sup>3</sup>Brig, Commandant, Military Hospital Gwalior, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India


**Address for correspondence:** Brig (Dr) S. K. Sengupta, Lane No. 1, LIC Colony, Kashida, Ghatsila, East Singhbhum, Jharkhand, India.  
E-mail: sudipdebashree@gmail.com

**Received:** 21-07-2023 **Accepted:** 22-07-2023 **Published:** 29-09-2023

## REFERENCES

1. Bhatoe HS. Diffuse idiopathic skeletal hyperostosis. *J Appl Med* 1993;19:537-8.
2. Bhatoe HS, Gill HS, Bajpayee CP. Management of locked facets of cervical spine. In: Ramani PS, Sharma A, editors. *Modern Trends in the Management of Neurotrauma*. Bombay: Department of Neurosurgery, LNT Hospital and Medical College; 1994.
3. Bhatoe HS. Epidural spinal tuberculoma. *Australas Radiol* 1995;39:179-81.
4. Bhatoe HS. Intramedullary spinal cord tuberculoma. *Indian J Of tuberculosis* 1996;(43):99-100.
5. Bhatoe HS. Spinal cord injury. *J Neurosurg* 2001;94:339-40.
6. Bhatoe HS. Thoracic spinal canal stenosis. *J Appl Med* 1996;22:83-5.
7. Bhatoe HS, Singh P. Missile injuries of the spine. *Neurol India* 2003;51:507-11.

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

| Access this article online  |   |
|---|---|
| Quick Response Code:  | Website:<br><a href="https://journals.lww.com/joss">https://journals.lww.com/joss</a> |
|  | DOI:<br>10.4103/joss.joss_24_23   |

|  |
|--|
| <b>How to cite this article:</b> Sengupta SK, Shashivadhanan S, Rappai TJ. Brigadier (Dr.) Harjinder Singh Bhatoe: We learned spine surgery from. <i>J Spinal Surg</i> 2023;10:138-40. |
|--|