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A complete woman

Chitra Sarkar

I was lucky to be born in a middle class family which prioritized academic excellence. I was an only child, and my father treated me like a son in the way he encouraged my education, while my mother ensured that I also developed the skills I would need later as a wife and mother. It was in high school that I realized that mathematics was not my cup of tea. Hence I switched to biology and that paved the way for my entry into medical sciences. Study in medical school was also made possible because the government of India awarded me a merit scholarship for academic excellence.

After I completed my M.B.B.S from Bangalore Medical College, my parents, especially my father, encouraged me to do an M.D. It was at this stage that I had to decide on a subject of specialization. Ultimately, after a lot of debate, I chose pathology because it was the subject with the best blend of clinical and basic sciences and which helped me understand cause-effect relationships in health and disease. Also, since it did not involve heavy night duties, it would help me to look after my family. It was my father's dream for me to pursue post-graduate studies at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), the premier medical institute in India. Destiny had a great hand in fulfilling my father's

dream and in getting me my subject of choice. In July 1978, in the All India entrance, I was selected at AIIMS in the Department of Pathology.

It was here that I first got introduced to research, since the M.D. degree here had a thesis component. Again, I was extremely lucky to have four very encouraging and noble teachers, viz. Prof. Subimal Roy and Prof. N.C. Nayak from Pathology and Prof. P. N. Tandon and Prof. A.K. Banerji and Neurosurgery, who are responsible for my career today in neuropathology, a subspeciality of pathology that deals with diseases of the brain, spinal cord, muscle and nerves. The other great influence was that of Prof. P.L. Lantos, Head of Neuropathology at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, a doyen in his field, under whom I did my fellowship in neuropathology.

After completing my residency and fellowship programmes, I joined as faculty in the Dept. of Pathology at AIIMS and since 1998, I have been Professor of Pathology as well as Chief of the Neuropathology Division. What I have enjoyed most about this job is that it enables me to see patients, teach students and also pursue research; hence there is no monotony. Clinical medicine gives me a lot of satisfaction when I see my patients getting cured. Teaching and interaction with my students has helped keep me young. However, it is the research component which gives me the greatest pleasure because it allows me to translate new bench innovations to the patient's bedside. Research in medical sciences in India is still in its infancy and there are very few doctors who pursue research. Clinical research is very challenging and there are many opportunities in India not only because of the large numbers of people but also because of the wide variety and unique diseases endemic to our country.

During these years, I got married and had a daughter. My parents also stay with me. Most women feel that family responsibilities are a hindrance to professional progress. But I feel I have progressed only because of family support and encouragement, first from my parents, then my husband and finally my daughter who never complained about the time that my profession demanded. Also my teachers, and mentors' continued encourage-

ment and their faith in my competence helped me through several stressful periods of my career and sustained my interest in neuropathology. Further, it was the successful research experience I had at a relatively young age coupled with joy of seeing my name in print and my papers quoted in leading textbooks of medicine as well as receiving numerous prestigious awards that helped me sustain my research career.

I am happy that I have been able to accomplish everything in life as a complete woman in different roles – daughter, wife, mother, teacher, doctor and researcher. I feel I am blessed and would do nothing different in life if asked to do it all over again.