



The Saint Psychiatrist



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My memory goes back to 1974, when I was yet to join medicine. I had heard that there is a doctor at the Government Medical College, Rohtak, who often supports many patients financially. I joined MBBS at the same College in August 1976. Then, I came to know that it was Dr Vidya Sagar who used to financially support patients from his salary. Department of Psychiatry at the Medical College, Rohtak comprised of a distinct building on a road opposite the College's OPD and emergency block. This 75 bedded Department with 5 faculty members was probably one of the biggest Psychiatry Departments of the country in late 1970s. This was the legacy of Dr Vidya Sagar, well known for his family and group therapy sessions at Mental Hospital, Amritsar in 1950s.

In 1950s and 60s, Dr Vidya Sagar was Medical Superintendent, Mental Hospital, Amritsar. There was not much space

available in the hospital at that time for all the patients. Dr Vidya Sagar got hold of tents left by the British army and arranged accommodation for the patients and the families. This was the time no antipsychotics or antidepressants were available. Often, the patients would stay for weeks and months with family members. The hospital had a capacity of 1150 beds (700 males and 450 females) and an additional 150 patients with family members would be staying outside the hospital in tents. Those days, this was the only mental hospital north of Agra in India. Dr Vidya Sagar would hold regular group therapy sessions with the patients and the families. He would often take quotes from Bhagwat Gita and discuss their application in mental illness and patient care. Most patients would improve and go back to their homes with the families having learnt how to take care of their ward. This was a unique example of therapeutic community in India at the formal beginning of Psychiatry services for ordinary people. Later in 1966, Dr Vidya Sagar shifted to the Medical College, Rohtak as Professor of Psychiatry. Dr Vidya Sagar retired in 1969, continued to work till his death (24th Nov 1978) as Professor Emeritus at the College.

Dr Vidya Sagar passed away in 1978, while he was at Jammu, while on a family visit. I remember joining a prayer procession of nearly 3 kilometers held in his memory starting from the Medical College to a temple he had been attached to. Dr Vidya Sagar had also served as President, Indian Psychiatric Society in 1972-73. While at Amritsar and Rohtak, Dr Vidya Sagar used to work tirelessly starting at 8 in morning and continuing till 11 PM. It is difficult to believe, how he could do like it. But his

Down the memory lane

devotion to the patients and the profession was unmatched.

I can also recall an incident of mid 1930s, narrated by Dr PN Chutani, Director, PGIMER, Chandigarh (1969-1978) in a column in The Tribune sometime in 1983. Dr Vidya Sagar was a house physician at the King Edward Medical College, Lahore and Dr Chutani was a first year MBBS student. As a first-year student, Chutani with one of his friends with white coats went to see the Medicine ward in the hospital and encountered Dr Vidya Sagar. He sent them back telling them that they were not expected to be in Medicine ward at this stage and should wait for their clinical postings.

During 1983-1987, while working at PGIMER, Chandigarh as junior and senior resident, I rarely came across a patient in psychiatry opd or ward, who or his family members had not consulted Dr Vidya Sagar. During my psychiatry clinical posting sometime in September 1979, in one of the clinical classes, I vividly remember a patient crying loudly and remembering him in front of a photograph of Dr Vidya Sagar, displayed on the wall in psychiatry outpatient. Dr. Erna Hoch a psychiatrist of Swiss origin and Advisor to the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India, on her visit to mental hospital, Amritsar in November, 1964 was so impressed by the devotion of Dr Vidya Sagar that she had commented, “You have here at Amritsar a sea of nectar (Amrit) of human kindness, and Dr. Vidya Sagar, a sea of wisdom. May they never dry up”. I remember having a brief talk about Dr Vidya Sagar with Dr Raghu Gaind, a senior psychiatrist of Indian origin from the UK during ANCIPS 2003 at Hyderabad. Dr Gaind was about to take a lecture on Contributions of Indian psychiatry and showed me a slide with Dr Vidya Sagar’s photograph with a comment that he was a “**Saint**”, much more than a doctor or a teacher. The comment was very

appropriate, considering the way Dr Vidya Sagar spent his lifetime serving the patients with great humanity.

Dr Vidya Sagar's legacy continues at two places he worked in form of Dr Vidya Sagar Institute of Mental Health at Amritsar and Dr Vidya Sagar Department of Psychiatry at the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Sciences, Rohtak. At Delhi, his family built Vidya Sagar Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (VIMHANS), which is functioning for more than 3 decades. Indian Council of Medical Research has an award Instituted in his memory. All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi has a gold medal instituted in his name for MD Psychiatry course. I always have a regret of not having met him physically during my initial days at the Medical College, Rohtak.