

IN MEMORIAM

Vivek Kusumakar

Stan Kutcher MD¹

It was about a year ago and Vivek and I were sitting in his kitchen, single malts in hand and waxing philosophical. It was late and the house was dark-silent with only a kind of restless spirit sounds of two middle-aged guys to keep it company. He had not been well and had been fighting back against the weakness of a heart that betrayed the strength of his mind. As always we were chatting.

“There will come a time when we are gone and who we have been and what we have done will be as if we have never been there.”

“Maybe, but maybe not.”

Who knew that in such a short time one of us would be writing his remembrance of the other.

Vivek was a friend, a colleague and I, like all his friends and colleagues miss him. The details are surprisingly simple. Born in Mumbai, India on October, 1951 and died in Washington, DC, USA in January, 2009. Much too short a time he was with us.

He was one of those rare people who could see the forest and the trees at the same time. A first rate clinician, a critical thinker and a person who would call you at one in the morning because he had an idea he wanted to challenge. And, also because he hardly ever seemed to sleep.

Although to his Canadian peers Vivek's name is tied to Halifax, he was truly a global citizen. Medical school at Kasturba Medical College (KMC) in Mangalore, post-graduate psychiatry training at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuroscience in Bangalore, the MRC Psych completed in Ireland and then work in Glasgow and Edinburgh Scotland prior to coming to Canada in 1992.

I first met Vivek in Edinburgh, at the Young People's Unit of the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. Who was this crazy guy who started meetings at 0914 and 1137 hours? I was working at the

Brain Metabolism Unit and “clinically slumming” so as to continue adolescent psychiatry work while eye-deep in research. Vivek came to our walk up tenement flat for “tea” the first week we worked together, and never complained that all he got was tea. It was only much later that we learned that in Scotland “tea” meant a light dinner – and he was probably famished. Oh well, we made up for that many times over in subsequent years.

After Dalhousie had lured him to Canada – thanks to Alister Munroe, Herb Orlik and Aidan Stokes, Vivek settled into his child and adolescent psychiatry work like a duck takes to water. Never satisfied with simply doing what was expected, he took to doing what was needed. And as we all know, in our discipline, regardless of where we are, doing what is needed is a big job. Vivek worked to help reorganize and revitalize the child and youth mental health services in Nova Scotia. He developed the mood disorders program at the IWK Health Center and embedded research into ongoing clinical care. Vivek believed in collaboration and community and worked hand in glove with parents, community groups and organizations (for example: Reaching Out and the Metropolitan Immigrant Services Association) and young people – all together with the goal of improving the lives of those touched by mental illness. Academically he co-lead the development of the bipolar research program at Dalhousie and translated his success in that initiative to national and international leadership in that area. He played a major role in establishing the first youth mental health chair in Canada. Nationally he directed his considerable talents to the work of the Academy, particularly to the Journal and the scientific program. His list of academic papers and books serve as reminders of his groundbreaking research work and scholarly pursuits. His roster of patients – young people and families who found optimism and success in spite of illness serve as living reminders of his dedication and commitment to others. His many students, colleagues and collaborators serve as

¹WHO Collaborating Center in Mental Health Policy and Training, Dalhousie University and the IWK Health Center, Halifax, Nova Scotia

continued examples of the breadth and continuation of his efforts and ideas.

Vivek moved from Dalhousie to become Global Senior Director of CNS, Pain and Translational Medicine with Johnson & Johnson in Princeton New Jersey. There he continued his contribution to expanding our horizons in pharmacotherapeutics for young people suffering from mental disorders. Even when away however he kept in touch, always interested in who was doing what and how things were going.

There never was a discussion that Vivek would pass on, and the more heated the better. And the topic did not matter. From cricket (which he was passionate about) to arcane cinema to history or cultural anthropology he brought his wide knowledge to bear alongside his enthusiastic curiosity about everything and everybody. Many an enjoyable evening was spent with Viv and friends – a bottle of wine or three – and hours of the cut and thrust of respectful debate. “Come on over for a meal” was one of his favorite callouts. That meant not only be prepared to sample some fantastic

cuisine but be prepared to settle in for some kind of chat.

Vivek met Shalini in 1973 when she was an undergraduate psychology student in Mangalore. They married and had two children – Sidhardth and Smitha. Sid is now a lawyer with Olswang in London UK and Smitha puts her MPH to good use with the British Heart Foundation. Sid and his wife Joanne have a young child – he is almost six months old now. He was the apple of Vivek’s eye. I never saw Viv so grin-faced as when he talked about his grandson. According to Shalini, he has just started on solid food this week. Seems he is getting ready to sink his teeth into life and take a big bite of it. Just like his grandpa.

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