

Noshir Hormusji Wadia (1925–2016)

‘The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.’

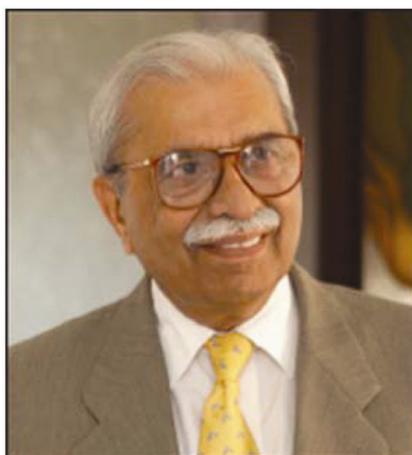
H. W. Longfellow

Professor Noshir H. Wadia, a pioneer and avantgarde neurologist, considered the grand old man of Indian neurology, and revered by hundreds of his patients, students, colleagues, friends and family, passed away on 10 April 2016.

He was born to Hormusji and Dinamai Wadia, as one of five children in Surat, Gujarat. He embarked on his journey to the UK in 1951 to train in neurology, after the seamless completion of his undergraduate and postgraduate medical education (1943–50) from Grant Medical College and Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy group of hospitals, Mumbai. Little would the medical world in India have known that a new chapter was being scripted in the history of Indian neurology. In the next five years in the UK, Wadia worked as house physician in the department of neurosurgery, Newcastle General Hospital, as resident medical officer in the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases, London and as registrar to Russel Brain in the department of neurology of the London Hospital. He won, despite stiff competition from British residents, the opportunity to train under the illustrious Walter Russel Brain, the author of the standard text book of neurology *Diseases of the brain*. The training under Lord Brain, the long-time editor of the reputed neurology medical journal *Brain* and the President of the Royal College of Physicians London, left a deep impact on young Noshir and culminated in an association that they both nurtured for several years. Walter Brain’s strong words of support earned him the opportunity to become the first Asian to be a registrar and tutor at the London hospital. The ensuing promotion to senior registrarship based on research and publications, set him on the right course of academics and clinical research in a career spanning more than five decades. His very first publication on an *Atypical features in acoustic neuroma* was published in the journal *Brain*.

On his return to India, Wadia was appointed to the JJ Group of Hospitals as

honorary assistant neurologist and lecturer in neurology in Grant Medical College in January 1957. The 32-year old neurologist dedicated himself to developing the department of neurology, starting with very limited facilities. By nurturing the growth of the departments of neurosurgery, neuroradiology and neuropathology around it, he transformed it into a full-fledged neuroscience centre that attracted several eminent faculty and generated excellent clinical and research output. In his own words, ‘It was worthwhile wearing out of the soles of my shoes in the corridors of the relevant ministries in New Delhi in those days’.



Quick to recognize the difference in the frequencies and types of neurological disorders in India versus the UK, he delved into the study of tuberculosis of the brain and spinal cord, the neurological complications of manganese toxicity, the varied neurological manifestations of craniovertebral anomalies, the nutritional disorders affecting the nervous system, and the spectrum of presentations of Wilson’s disease, to name some. His large body of work spanning several different areas of neurology speaks for the diligent researcher he was. However, most neurologists would consider as his seminal contributions, the description of two novel neurological entities from India: (a) ‘utosomal dominant cerebellar ataxia with slow eye movements’ which was later renamed as ‘spinocerebellar ataxia type 2 (SCA2)’ caused by mutations in the *ATXN2* gene and (b) EV70 disease. He described a polio-like illness in two of his patients following acute

haemorrhagic conjunctivitis, which he was convinced, was related to the conjunctivitis. Many years later, when the enterovirus EV40 was isolated from Japanese patients with conjunctivitis, he, along with the Japanese team, injected the virus into the theca of monkeys and reproduced the hind limb paralysis, thus confirming his clinical suspicion. Such was his tenacity for research and razor sharp, his clinical acumen, both of which left his colleagues and students awestruck!

During his illustrious career, he served several institutions, as consultant neurologist for life for the JJ Group of Hospitals and Grant Medical College, director of neurology and director of research, Jaslok Hospital and Research Centre, consultant neurologist for B. D. Petit General Hospital, Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and the Breach Candy Hospital and Research Centre.

He published over 100 research papers and book chapters, many of them in journals such as *Brain*, *The Lancet*, *British Medical Journal* and *Neurology*. He delivered 10 orations, 25 international lectures and was on the Editorial board of 4 journals. Recipient of the Padma Bhushan award, he was also conferred with several accolades by both national and international scientific bodies, notable among them being the Certificate of Appreciation for Services to Neurology, by the World Federation of Neurology.

Over the years, he trained several neurologists who are now spread across the world besides India. In the words of Sarosh Katrak, his former student, colleague and friend ‘Dr Wadia was an excellent teacher and mixed very freely with his students. He was also very patient with the students who had no inkling of neurology, making the subject easy and alive, thus steering many students to a career in Neurology. He always looked at the good qualities in an individual and never had a bad word for anybody’. Katrak recalled Wadia’s words with deep nostalgia, ‘Never ask a person if he is blind; instead, ask him what happened to his eyes’. His word of caution on how to conduct oneself in the profession was ‘If you leave your pen open in your pocket, it leaves a stain and people tend to see only the stain and not

the 99% of the rest of the shirt that is sparkling white'. Throughout his career, he treated others with utmost respect, a shining quality that added to his personality and an opinion that was echoed by all his colleagues.

He was elected to several national and international scientific societies and member of various national and international research committees. He was a member of several hospital boards and academic committees of several institutions (both national and international). He served as the chairman of the Governing Body and President of the Institute Body of the Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology (SCTIMST), Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. The institute was close to his heart, a sentiment stemming from long years of his association with it in various capacities. In the words of its

founding director M. S. Valiathan 'I hit it off with Prof. Wadia from the word go and he was an asset to SCTIMST as a member of its governing body, with his wealth of clinical and research experience and his genuine enthusiasm for the Sree Chitra model of medicine and technology under one roof'. In Wadia's recollections of his association with SCTIMST on its silver jubilee, he wrote 'I am proud to be a part of Sree Chitra and what it has achieved and full of hope for a greater tomorrow, even as I myself to begin to recede into the shadows'.

I feel personally privileged to have been the recipient of his profuse encouragement and unbridled support, to set up the first comprehensive care centre for movement disorders at Sree Chitra, during his term as the chairman of the institute's governing body. He keenly followed its progress and was open in his genuine

appreciation when our very first research work was published in *Brain*.

Despite many ailments taking their toll on him from time to time, he remained active till his last. At the end, he joined the ranks of many of his illustrious contemporaries, dying with his boots on and still in harness, but will be remembered with awe and admiration, by generations of Indian neurologists. He leaves behind his wife, a noted clinical neurophysiologist, Piroja Wadia, his two step sons and two brothers.

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