OBITUARY

Dr Sharad G Vaidya

Throughout India, we often said, we have only one professional person devoting 100% of the time to tobacco control—Dr Sharad G Vaidya from Goa. Alas Dr Vaidya is no more. He died on 19 October 2000 at Bombay Airport on his way from the UK to Goa.

Dr Vaidya was a surgeon specialising in cancer surgery, a profession perhaps natural for him because his surname means “physician” and because he came from a long line of family physicians. From early in his career, Dr Vaidya became more interested in cancer prevention than in surgery. He founded the Goa Cancer Society, the second such society in India. He took up tobacco education as a part of cancer prevention activities. The more he delved into the topic of tobacco, the more passionate he became about it. He founded the National Organisation for Tobacco Eradication and was its president.

He acquired a wide ranging knowledge of the tobacco industry, tobacco economics and even tobacco agriculture, and a deep understanding of the ways of the tobacco industry. He studied writings about the tobacco companies and books written by their executives. He would often come up with startling nuggets such as his discovery that the chairman of the Imperial Tobacco Company had played an important role in drafting the excise tax laws of British India, for which he was profusely thanked and rewarded by the government. Quite interesting when one considers that the same tobacco company (now ITC), the largest in India, does not let anyone forget for a moment that it is the largest contributor to excise tax in India.

Dr Vaidya had well understood the power of economics over health. He often said that one could understand tobacco much more by reading financial newspapers. He found out, for instance, that a large part of investment in tobacco companies in India and financial loans to them were from public sector undertakings.

Dr Vaidya worked on several scientific projects. Through a large non-randomised trial, he showed that educating children about tobacco produces a significant change in the tobacco use behaviour of the community.

His work on the effect of the sponsorship of sports events by tobacco companies on the perception, attitudes, and smoking behaviour of children was the first of its kind here and is widely quoted.

Dr Vaidya believed in developing personal contacts. If he heard about someone interested or contributing positively to tobacco control, he would track that person down, telephone him, and develop a personal rapport. He was a good communicator and powerful public speaker. His friends sometimes chided him that he had become rather emotional while speaking. His standard response was “how can anyone NOT get emotional while speaking about tobacco?”

Dr Vaidya developed an excellent rapport with the media. He was a prolific writer of letters to newspapers and was perhaps the person most often interviewed in India on the topic of tobacco. He was instrumental in getting The Goa Prohibition of Smoking and Spitting Act 1997 (Goa Act 5 of 1999) passed unanimously by the Goa legislative assembly and for the inclusion of lessons on tobacco in school textbooks in Goa.

Dr Sharad Vaidya will be missed by the tobacco control community, his numerous friends in India and abroad, and most of all by his wife, Dr Nirmala Vaidya, his sons, Jayant and Shekhar, grandchildren Hrisheekesh and Uma, and the extended Vaidya family that has a tradition of providing social service and health care in Goa for over 300 years.

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