Profiles in Preventive Cardiology

– Rustom Jal Vakil

The “Father of Modern Cardiology”, Dr. Rustom Jal Vakil was a prolific researcher, clinician and a pioneer in Indian cardiovascular epidemiology. He was known for his ease of communication across the people who he interacted, whether it was his students, peers or patients.

After obtaining his medical degree from University of London, Dr. Vakil returned to India. Cardiology, then not a distinct subspeciality in India, became his focus. After years of meticulous compilation and data analysis, in 1949, Dr. Vakil published a milestone paper on *Rauwolfia serpentina*’s antihypertensive properties which resulted in a paradigm shift in hypertension management. The acceptance of Rauwolfia, the 1st ever effective blood pressure lowering agent, steered researchers to continue development of other hypotensive treatments.

The then U.S. Surgeon General designated the introduction of *Rauwolfia* to Western medicine as “trail-blazing and an epoch-making discovery.” In the year 1957, Dr. Vakil was honoured with the esteemed Albert Lasker Award for his ‘brilliant and systematic studies on *Rauwolfia* in hypertension and his effective bridging of the gap between Indian experience and that of Western medicine’, and was denoted as the “Father of *Rauwolfia*” and “Father of Indian Cardiology”.

Later in his life, Dr. Rustom statistically analyzed data of 15,063 cardiac patients, observed during 1946–1955, of which, 8,238 patients were from his private practice, while 6,825 were taken from King Edward Memorial Hospital (KEM), Bombay. He also published his experience with 5,615 ischemic heart disease patients in the British Heart Journal. His epidemiologic studies majorly contributed to the rising pool of knowledge on cardiovascular disease.

Dr. Vakil’s endeavours were substantiated by relevance, dedication, and were appropriately distinguished. Apart from being the 1st Asian to receive the Lasker award, he was the recipient of numerous national and international honors, awards, and medals, including Padma Bhushan, Dr B.C. Roy Award, Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Award, Dhanwantri Award, World Congress of Cardiology Souvenir Award and fellowships of the Royal College of Physicians of London, and the American College of Cardiology.

Dr. Vakil always yearned for a center of excellence dedicated to the prevention, early detection and treatment of cardiovascular diseases. His dream was fulfilled on September 28th, 1974, with the inception of the Institute of Cardiology and Research Centre at the KEM Hospital, for which he himself contributed Rs.1,00,000. Within a couple of months after this, Dr. Vakil’s death at the age of 63, caused by aortic dissection and myocardial infarction shook the entire world.