

The AASAN ambassadorship - A life changing journey

As I packed my bags on a rainy September night in Trivandrum, little did I realize that the journey to begin, would change my life. Chosen to be a representative of South Asia's young neurosurgeons' community, caused some apprehension, but it soon fizzled out as I set foot in the United States. The days that came by, changed my perspective and attitude towards my profession and life at large. Perhaps, I could borrow a line from the physician-poet Oliver W. Holmes Jr, to sum it up all.....
"A mind that is stretched by a fabulous new experience can never go back to its old dimensions"

The AASAN ambassadorship: How it came by ?

Having trained and worked in some of the best institutes in India, I was eagerly looking forward to get a feel of a top rated, high volume US neurosurgical program. An email circulated by Dr. Shekar Kurpad (President, AASAN) through the NSI was godsend and the rest is now history. As epilepsy surgery was what I practiced most, I found a mentor in Dr. Gary Mathern, director of pediatric epilepsy at UCLA who was very eager to invite me over.

The phenomenal "ambassadorship" experience

UCLA welcomed me with open arms and soon a different new world opened up. I soaked and absorbed each and every bit of knowledge, skill or worldly neurosurgical wisdom that came by. Everyday was 'action packed' and memorable with M&M meetings, seminars, epilepsy patient discussions, clinics, OR visits and skull base labs. Prof Neil Martin, the chief of neurosurgery at UCLA was an inspiring force and so were Dr. Mathern, Dr. Fried, Dr. Bergsneider, Dr. Ausman, Dr Yang, Dr. Pouratian, Dr. Malkasian and several others. My interactions with the nurses, hospital helpers, spiritual care givers, hospital volunteers opened up a new realm of 'holistic' care before me. The friendships formed shall be cherished by me for a lifetime. The CNS annual meet which followed, was a global platform to present my centre's experience with epilepsy surgery in India. It was also a wonderful opportunity to meet the AASAN "torch bearers" whose vision made all this happen. Each and every person I met taught me something different during this ambassadorship.

Is it any different in India?

Though we are all repairing the same human brain, things are a bit different in India. It is 1 neurosurgeon for 85,542 people in the US (AANS, 2007) and about 1 for 6,00,000 people in India, so it's all about optimal use of resources for maximum benefit back home. Sophisticated gadgetry is scarce and a culture of basic and clinical research is yet to sprout. It is all about numbers and trying to accommodate all the sick and suffering in the ever increasing "surgical wait list". Despite the limited resources, the work done at several academic centres is commendable and an opportunity for young neurosurgeons from India to have an overview of 'state of the art' American centres could work wonders.

Looking ahead....as I go back

Neurosurgery is not just about skill, technique and a large number of 'cases'. The AASAN ambassadorship helped me to understand the best in "standard of care" and inspires me to strive hard to maintain it when I get to those who need my skills back home. It helped me interact with people from diverse cultures and worthier professional pursuits, making it a wholesome and refreshing experience. The bonds formed would be cherished forever.

Ever grateful ...Reciprocity?

"Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy, they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom" ... Proust. I can never thank the AASAN enough for this life changing journey. Dr. Shekar Kurpad, Dr. Ketan Bulsara, Dr. Beejal Amin, Dr. Ashwini Sharan, Dr. Harman and all the other torch bearers of AASAN deserve a special word of gratitude. Shall remain ever indebted and say "sumimasen" (a Japanese thank you which means 'this will not end'). May many others benefit from this benevolence in future and sincerely hope I could reciprocate this kindness someday. As I go back home, the distances would be back in kilometers not miles, the temperature back to degrees celsius not fahrenheit but life perhaps, would have a new perspective. The beautiful memories shall linger on forever.

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15th October 2013