

Pran Nath Nagpal – The little master with a big footprint

"In a gentle way, you can shake the world." – Mahatma Gandhi

There was a time, as recent as the late 1970s, when patients with retinal diseases in India were considered doomed to their fate due to lack of expertise to diagnose and appropriately treat these imminently blinding conditions. Prof. Pran Nath Nagpal, lovingly called PNN by his colleagues, friends, and students, then emerged as a messiah and brought them the gift of sight with his expertise and compassionate attitude.

A barrister family in Muzaffargarh in erstwhile Pakistan was blessed with a baby boy on August 12, 1940. The happiness was short-lived as the Nagpal family went through the turmoil of World War II, followed by the partition of the country in 1947, which uprooted them and led them to Ganganagar and Jaipur. PNN, with his acumen and penchant for excellence, completed his medical education and postgraduation in ophthalmology from the Sawai Man Singh Medical College, Jaipur, Rajasthan. He then joined the faculty of the M & J Institute of Ophthalmology, affiliated to the BJ Medical College in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, which was then growing as a center of excellence in eye care in western India under the leadership of legendary Prof. R. P. Dhanda. Morarji Desai, then Prime Minister of India, on his visit to the M & J Institute of Ophthalmology, was introduced to a young and brilliant faculty member who had been awarded an international fellowship to pursue specialized training in retinal disease. That was PNN, who was to go to the iconic University Eye Clinic, Essen in Germany, headed by Prof. Meyer-Schwickerath, the very inventor of photocoagulation for treating retinal disorders [Fig. 1]. The rest is history. PNN returned from Essen in 1971 with a glint in his eyes, desire in his heart, and fire in his belly to establish a specialized department of retina and serve the needy.

"Pran Nath Nagpal played an enormous role in educating vitreoretinal surgeons of India. He exemplifies humble but very effective leadership. He is devoid of ego or greed and always does the right things. I am honored to be his friend." – Prof. Steve Charles [Fig. 2].

An astute clinician, a workaholic and disciplinarian, adorable teacher, and a devoted academician, PNN established and nurtured retina as a subspecialty at the M & J Institute of Ophthalmology in Ahmedabad and M. P. Shah Medical College in Jamnagar, Gujarat. Envisioning the need for a larger-scale and well-equipped clinical facility for specialized management of retinal diseases, PNN established the Retina Foundation in Ahmedabad in 1976 along with Prof J. H. Patel. It was intended to be a center of excellence for the treatment of retinal diseases with equal emphasis on education and training. In 1979, the Retina Foundation moved to its permanent abode in Shahibaug, Ahmedabad, and Aso Palav Eye Hospital was established to offer efficient and cost-effective comprehensive eye care facilities. With its motto *"in the service of blind"*, the Retina Foundation, in the last four decades, has treated innumerable patients and trained over 225 fellows from all parts of the world in the art and science of retinal disorders. The first argon

crypton laser in India was installed in the Retina Foundation. I was fortunate to be a fellow then and was thrilled to see how a laser beam could stop retinal hemorrhage, seal retinal tears, and treat retinal detachment.

"Pran Nath Nagpal was pivotal in establishing what is now a thriving and positive relationship between Indian and American ophthalmology and this has played an important role in the huge impact of Indian leadership in world ophthalmology" – Prof. Bruce Spivey [Fig. 3].

The quality of scientific deliberations at the All India Ophthalmological Society (AIOS) was deeply enriched by Prof. Nagpal's chairmanship of the Scientific Committee for two consecutive terms (1984–1989). This was the golden era of Indian ophthalmology. PNN toiled hard and ensured that young ophthalmologists got the opportunity to receive



Figure 1: Prof. P. N. Nagpal with his mentor Prof. Gerhard Meyer-Schwickerath



Figure 2: Prof. P. N. Nagpal with Prof. Steve Charles on one of his visits to the Retina Foundation, Ahmedabad

quality education and training from the best of clinicians and academicians. Administrative responsibilities ably shouldered by PNN include - Chairman of the Ethics Committee of AIOS, Member of the Advisory Committee to International Council of Ophthalmology, Member of the International Advisory Committee of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, and Member of the WHO International Advisory Board to Aravind Eye Hospital. He has had a robust academic career, having been part of the editorial board of the American Journal of Ophthalmology, World Ophthalmology News, EyeNet, Ocular Surgery News, Highlights of Ophthalmology, and Indian Journal of Ophthalmology.

The Ahmedabad Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) was his brainchild, which he, along with another giant in ophthalmology, Dr. Anil Bavishi, initiated to organize an annual national symposium in ophthalmology dedicated to various subspecialties [Fig. 4]. The AAO invited world leaders in each ophthalmic subspecialty to visit India and teach for 3 days. The symposia helped young ophthalmologists broaden their knowledge and make a well-informed decision regarding their potential area of specialization. At PNN's request, Prof. Bruce Spivey helped provide complimentary registration to 15 ophthalmologists every year to participate in the annual meeting of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the world's largest conglomeration of ophthalmologists. I had the opportunity to be part of the first group of ophthalmologists who were accorded this privilege. This simple act widened our horizons and helped boost our confidence immensely. PNN, along with Prof. S. R. K. Malik and Prof. Jaiveer Agrawal, was instrumental in impressing upon the Government of India to provide customs duty exemption for imported ophthalmic equipment, thus making sophisticated tools of the trade accessible to Indian ophthalmologists. This one gesture alone helped usher in state-of-the-art diagnostics and microsurgery and brought about a new revolution in Indian ophthalmology.

"Superb mentor and motivator, with optimal measures of discipline and congeniality – these rare traits make PNN shine very bright even in the galaxy of legends." – Dr. Lalit Verma

PNN's journey has been full of accolades and blessings from his grateful fraternity. His immense contributions have been richly rewarded with prestigious awards and recognitions including Fellow of German Academic Exchange, Fellow of the American College of Surgeon, Member Emeritus of the Association of Research and Vision in Ophthalmology, Lifetime Achievement Award by the AIOS, Vitreoretinal Society of India and Gujarat Ophthalmic Society, Dr. P. Siva Reddy Gold Medal and Orator by the AIOS, and Hari Om Prerit Alembic Gold Medal. Prof. Nagpal is a recipient of the highest award in medicine in the country, Dr. B. C. Roy Award developing the subspecialty of retina in India.

"Prof. Nagpal is a pioneer in the field of ophthalmology. I have known him for over four decades and appreciate his efforts, enthusiasm, and perseverance in teaching and disseminating the knowledge on the recent developments in ophthalmology in general and vitreoretinal specialty in particular. I am proud of my association with him." – Dr. P. Namperumalsamy

Throughout his illustrious career, his wife, Prof. Sudha Nagpal, former professor of gynecology at the Civil Hospital, Ahmedabad, has been by his side and has supported him untiringly [Fig. 5]. PNN continues to nurse his passion for teaching as the Professor Emeritus at the M & J Institute of Ophthalmology and B. J. Medical College in Ahmedabad. Prof. Nagpal's legacy is carried forward eminently by the admirable work of the fellows trained by him and his children, Manish Nagpal and Ashish Nagpal.



Figure 3: Prof. P. N. Nagpal and Prof. Sudha Nagpal with Prof. Bruce Spivey and his wife Amanda



Figure 4: Prof. P. N. Nagpal with his friend Dr. Anil Bavishi, with whom he started the Ahmedabad Academy of Ophthalmology



Figure 5: PNN with his pillar of strength, wife Prof. Sudha Nagpal

"As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them." – John F. Kennedy

I would like to conclude with the following: *"I owe my existence in this world to my parents, but I owe my presence in this world to you PNN Sir."* My humble salutations and the very best wishes for the best of health and happiness.

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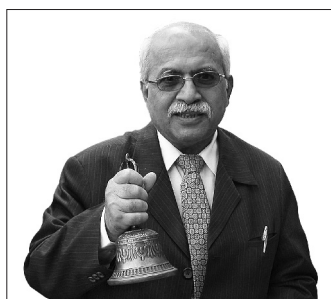
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About the author



Prof. Prashant Agnihotri

With about 40-years of experience in Ophthalmology, having worked with stalwarts of the profession at premier institutes around the world, being one of the first retinal surgeons in Nagpur and the region, Prof. Agnihotri is considered one of the doyens of Ophthalmology in Central India. He was one of the first fellows of Prof. PN Nagpal and has imbibed the best of clinical skills and passion for teaching from his mentor. He further honed his skills observing Dr Charles Schepens and Dr. Peter Choyce. Having begun his career as an Assistant Professor at the Government Medical College, Nagpur in 1981, Prof. Agnihotri has held several academic positions in the past as Professor at the Siddhartha Institute of Medical Sciences, Vijayawada, Meenakshi Medical College, Kanchipuram and SVS Medical College, Mahbubnagar. Prof. Agnihotri has been active in medico-social work, having been the Chairman, Sight First, Lions Club International and Sight Research Foundation. He has been recognized with Honorary FAICO by the AIOS, Ambassador of Goodwill Award by the Rotary Club of India, Retina Foundation Gold Medal by the Gujarat Ophthalmological Society, and Dr. SV Tare Oration. Prof. Agnihotri is an avid and a much-awarded golfer as well.



Cover Page Image

Prof. Pran Nath Nagpal - An immortal inspiration

The picture shows Prof. Nagpal and his iconic bell. A stickler to time and a disciplinarian to the core, Prof. Nagpal is known to ring the bell to signal an end to the lunch break and the beginning of the scientific session in the conferences that he would organize.

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