

Dr Blue

Praise for the Book

‘Medicine has taught me many lessons over the years, but perhaps the most enduring [one] is that while science may cure disease, it is our humanity that heals. Every patient brings not only a diagnosis but also a story. If we are fortunate, those stories shape us as profoundly as we hope to shape the lives of those we treat. [This] is the heart of *Dr Blue: A Cancer Surgeon’s Journey into the Human Side of Healing*.

Throughout my career in oncology, I have witnessed extraordinary advances in cancer treatment. Yet, one truth has never changed: Medicine is, above all, a profoundly human endeavour. Healing is not measured only by successful operations or years added to life. It is also found in listening, comforting, reassuring and helping patients face uncertainty with dignity and hope.

The stories in this book celebrate the resilience and courage of patients who confronted cancer with remarkable strength. They also remind us that physicians are not only teachers but also lifelong students. Our patients teach us humility, compassion, resilience and the privilege of sharing life’s most vulnerable moments.

Whether you are a physician, a patient, a caregiver or simply a reader seeking inspiration, you will find wisdom in these pages. Dr Jagannath has written with honesty, grace and deep respect for the people whose lives have enriched his own. Their stories remind us that the greatest legacy of a physician is not merely the diseases treated or the procedures performed, but the compassion shared, the trust earned and the lives forever touched.’

— Dr Dattatreyyudu Nori

‘Cricket is a data-rich sport, but numbers tell only part of the story. A scoreboard can show runs and wickets, but it cannot capture what goes behind scoring runs or getting wickets – the trust between teammates or the courage of players walking out to bat under pressure. Dr Jagannath’s book reminds us of this truth in the world of medicine.

Dr Jagannath has listed his experiences beyond medical reports and procedures – the human acts of listening, of placing a hand with attention, of carrying families through uncertainty. Just as cricket is played not only on the pitch but also in the hearts of those who watch, healthcare too lives beyond medicines and operating theatres. It lives in the faith patients place in their doctors, and in the compassion that sustains them through fear.

More than being an authority on healthcare, what comes out throughout this book is Dr Jagannath's empathy as a caregiver. His stories remind us that excellence is not a slogan but a daily discipline – whether in the operating room or on the cricket field. Readers will find in these pages lessons about resilience and humility, which can be emulated by not just healthcare professionals but also people from all walks of life. Wishing Dr Jagannath all the very best for his memoir.'

— Sachin and Anjali Tendulkar

'The same gifted hands that heal with a scalpel also move hearts with a pen. His stories are filled with humour and depth.'

— Twinkle Khanna

Dr Blue

A Cancer Surgeon's Journey into
the Human Side of Healing

Dr P. Jagannath

with

Pankaj Mishra

 juggernaut

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Most names of patients in the book have been changed, except where the authors received explicit permission, and no names used violate the Hippocratic Oath.

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To my parents, who gave me my values.



To my patients, who gave those values purpose.

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Foreword

Beneath the Blue

Amitabh Bachchan



*Beyond the legend, admired by millions, stands a gentleman –
gracious, humble and generous with his time. A memorable moment with
Shri Amitabh Bachchan.*

पश्येम शरदः शतम्, जीवेम शरदः शतम्।
 बुध्येम शरदः शतम्, रोहेम शरदः शतम्।
 यशः स्याम शरदः शतम्, प्रब्रवाम शरदः शतम्।
 अदीनाः स्याम शरदः शतम्, भूयश्च शरदः शतात्॥
 — यजुर्वेद

*May you see a hundred Sharad Ritu, may you be a hundred
 Sharad Ritu, may knowledge and wisdom be with you, may
 your progress continue, may success be yours, may all that is good
 to hear be with you, may you never be in want, may you live
 beyond hundred...*

— YAJURVEDA

This is for my friend and healer, Dr P. Jagannath, in presenting his book titled *Dr Blue*.

I see the ‘Blue’ in the title of this memoir for more than the humble cues that Dr Jagannath has described. I see in it the blue of the sky, and also the blue of Shiva’s throat – नील गगन and नीलकण्ठ. The blue of Shiva’s throat is more than just an allegory – it’s an analogy of everything, in the life of a life that has given itself to saving other lives. Dr Jagannath’s story is, in many parts, the life of a *neelkanth*.

Dr Jagannath’s humility and grace in his simplicity in this treatise is most revealing.

Sometimes, by some divination, two lives in pursuit of their own truths meet each other, like a *prayag* (confluence) of two perennial rivers; like a surgeon meets a patient in a gently lit operating theatre. Like, we had met. I am actually a living testimony of Dr Jagannath’s mastery of his art. Dr Jagannath, I feel, is an embodiment of that spirit and an ardent devotee of his calling. More than four decades in surgery, four decades of saving lives, four decades of defying the odds of death of patients who bestow

complete trust in him. I say, this is more than human, and by no means a simple gesture.

His style of writing the memoir is so conversational that, I admit, it made me smile at awkward moments. You see, there is this connection in all of us who had chosen Mumbai as our destination, and the city had welcomed us as we were, rather than for who we were.

By the way, the English word ‘juggernaut’ comes from the Sanskrit word ‘Jagannath’. Though it doesn’t mean the same in English, I would say, Dr Jagannath personifies both – Jagannath and the juggernaut. His arrival and the enduring pursuit after that in our *karmabhoomi*, Mumbai, is no less than a juggernaut.

At times, when I paused and felt what Dr Jagannath was saying, I saw that it’s one thing for us to grieve for someone we know, and it’s another when he grieves for a patient who is a complete stranger. He has given himself to saving lives. And if a life is lost on his watch, we can see in his chronicle that it leaves futile anguish in its wake.

About the ambience of the operation theatre, I was amazed at how much he has observed his patients. I can’t say I have had the ‘pleasure’ of lying on that table. But nonetheless, it’s true that the presence of doctors is surely more reassuring than all the machines and lights around. And when you have a surgeon like Dr Jagannath who can feel your anxiety, you are willing to pass out under anaesthesia.

The procedures of surgery, as well as its protocols and precautions, are very gracefully described by Dr Jagannath, keeping in mind that some readers may be visualizing them on the go. Surreal.

For some of the new-age readers, some of the baby steps in modernizing cancer research might sound prehistoric. The use of COBOL, for instance. But without that first step, today’s leaps would not have been possible.

Healthcare is as ancient as the Vedas. But then, every so many years, there has been a great pathfinder who has revolutionized the course. Successive heads of governments have given a free run for researchers. I'm glad Dr Jagannath has narrated that chronicle in some detail.

On the other hand, while he talks about my punctuality, he's being too kind. Who would know the importance of punctuality more than a surgeon while working on a critical patient?

And for first readers of a memoir of a surgeon, may I assure you that this book is not course material for human anatomy and surgery. It's anything but that. This is a human life about human lives.

Here is a quote from this book:

And then comes another truth that separates surgery from many other crafts: Every finger has its own use. Each one must be used effectively. Not as five separate tools competing, but as a coordinated unit. When the fingers move in unison with precision, it becomes a symphony.

This word – symphony – may sound poetic, but I mean it in the most practical sense. Surgery is not only about intelligence. It is not only about knowledge. It is not only about courage. It is also about coordination: fingers, instruments, tissues, timing, the quiet choreography between hands and eyes, between touch and judgement.

When a person trusts you with his or her life, it's not just an ethical issue, it's also morality at its righteous best. Nothing is more sacrosanct than the trust.

An accident, by definition, is an unplanned incident. When we look back in time, we find a series of events that seems more

like a set of coincidences than plans. Both successes and failures are accidents if the effort is discounted. That might be fair to say only if we are not doing something that needs us to be right all the time.

For those of us who believe that the best effort is one that delivers the best, there are no accidents. Success and failure are the rewards of rigorous planning and work – plans that account for every contingency. This is why we use the analogy of a surgeon when admiring the good work of an artist in any field. ‘Surgical’ means accuracy, with perfect precision.

I guess every milestone, every turn and junction in the course of a journey can be seen as an accident when we decide to understate our efforts. But I believe that fate doesn’t work that way. Pain and struggle are most prevalent in the lives of those who have the strength to take them on. As in a boxing ring, the one who can take and withstand more punches wins.

The imaginary dichotomy between science and spirituality is often a mirage on the horizon. Science seems to be the end of the road, where the mind has reached the end of its wits and the spirit has nowhere to go. Neither, methinks, is true.

Without the spirit, science cannot invent anything.

The relationship between a patient and a surgeon is never a two-way street. It’s a contest in a single lane – the scientific competence of a surgeon versus the failing willpower of a patient.

Listening is more than simply hearing what is said. No one knows it better than the one who is diagnosing, investigating or

exploring. Our final *sankalp*, the decisions on the way forward, are usually reinforced with what we have listened to.

As Dr Jagannath says, 'Bharosa is a burden. It's also the ground we stand on.'

I am not sure who is in a better position to describe the relationship between a surgeon and the patient – the surgeon or the patient? From the patient's perspective, it could be: The physical reality of a malignant tumour is the same. One might assume that if you are a surgeon, and you have removed it once, you are doing the same for the rest of your life, regardless of whether the body on the table is alive or dead.

Dr Jagannath mentions a line from the Vedas:

अग्निं दूतं वृणीमहे होतारं विश्ववेदसम्। अस्य यज्ञस्य सुक्रतुम्॥

(This energy that we accept, which is within all that there is, is the priest of all that is knowable. It's the doer of this universe, the one that summons the divine faculties.)

To a large extent, I agree with patients who don't ask too many questions. देवताओं की हम उपासना करते हैं। सवाल नहीं पूछते। (We worship the gods, we don't question them.)

Distress is never too far from disappointment. There comes a stage in many people's lives when they choose to shrug and quit, often not considering the chances of new aspirations and new destinations. And, in case of illnesses – especially terminal ones like cancer – the only person who can instil a desire in the patient to live through the process is the doctor. It's always reassuring when a surgeon skips jargon and speaks the language of empathy.

How does a mother convince her young girl child during the first menstrual period that it's a new beginning of life, not the end? How does a father tell his son that creativity begins where

everything else fails? How does a teacher explain to the student that failure is only an opportunity to do better? How does a friend find ways and means to rescue another friend? A doctor does all these tasks of all these roles, as casually as if it's only one of the many things in the practice. Just be human.

Cancer terminates life in a strange way, even if the person survives. There are so many faces around the patient's bed in the hospital. Each one has a unique relationship. One may be grateful, another may be scared, another may become prayer personified, yet another may want to swap lives with the patient. The patient echoes the exact same feelings to each one.

Once out of the hospital, life is never the same as it was before. The anxiety of the illness takes a toll on one's sense of life. Every new challenge is followed by a question mark. As if a clock is ticking in the background. Some slow down, some step on the accelerator and a rare few stop looking at the time and move on.

Cancer is still a summit that is yet to be conquered. Dr Jagannath's efforts towards this are remarkable. He has travelled the world over in his pursuit of bringing the latest progress to India, and taking it to our remotest villages. The former is the research; the latter is the outreach. He has invested himself in both.

He brought the IHPBA World Congress to India in 2008, laying the foundations of a specialization that was searching for a footing in our ecosystem.

His presidency of the IHPB in the later years has been the story of trailblazers.

There are cognitive features in every life which go without words. And, sometimes a person is too modest to admit it.

Dr Jagannath's admiration for the peers in practice plays down his own research and achievements. His dedication to cancer research and treatment is among the best in the world. It's another thing that he makes seem routine.

Sometimes what is usual for one is unusual for the other, such that the two can never be reconciled. Dr Jagannath has raised a sapling in one small garden into a tree that has spread its shade over half the planet. Little can anyone imagine how it's done and what it takes.

The website indiacancer.com, which I was given the honour of launching in 2000 (now theindiacancer.org), with the precious participation of Sachin and Dr Anjali Tendulkar, got the impetus it deserved. The meteoric rise and outreach of communication technology have since then given the campaign a booster shot.

Apart from awareness of cancer as well as its early detection and funding, one of the most important aims of this campaign was to eradicate the mortal fear that the mere thought of cancer evokes.

A *karmayogi* like Dr P. Jagannath knows no borders or boundaries of his work – cancer research and treatment. His determination has taken him beyond known frontiers and also delivered his science and knowledge to several countries. The chronicle of Bhutan is one of his many encounters that left him with a feeling of immense promise.

The prevailing influence of our industrial pioneers, J.R.D. Tata and Ratan Tata, has set the highest standards of corporate governance, ethics and visionary leadership. Dr Jagannath has been among those rare beneficiaries of their guidance and interactions in real time.