

Ashok Chacko – President, Indian Society of Gastroenterology 2010–2011



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It was a chance meeting with Dr. Ashok Chacko at the Katpadi Railway Station in August 1982 that transformed my life, gave me the opportunity to foray into the exciting world of Gastroenterology, and, most importantly, gave me my best friend and invaluable colleague of over 28 years. It is, therefore, a great privilege for me to profile the new President of the Indian Society of Gastroenterology—Dr. Ashok Chacko—whose academic brilliance, professional excellence, immense wisdom and administrative skills make him the ideal person to take over this prestigious position this year.

Ashok was born on January 26, 1952 in Madras, as the only son of Mrs. and Mr. Cherian Chacko, who inculcated in him the spirit of service and instilled in him the desire to seek academic and professional excellence. The early years at the Don Bosco Matriculation School in Madras saw Ashok topping the school, and getting the fourth rank in the state in the Board examinations. During his pre-University course in Loyala College, Ashok secured the second rank and was an automatic choice to join the MBBS course at Stanley Medical College in Madras. He had a brilliant undergraduate career winning several awards and gold medals, including the ones in Pediatrics and Pharmacology.

Ashok was a keen enthusiast in sports and games, having represented his school in cricket and his college in tennis. His passion for tennis saw him play with the likes of Ashok Amirthraj, and for a brief period, it became his first love. It was fortuitous that some niggling injuries forced him to take a break from the game, which then brought him back on track to become one of the best doctors I have ever met.

Dr. Chacko moved to Vellore when he was selected to do MD (Internal Medicine) at the Christian Medical College (CMC) as an open candidate. CMC provided Ashok with the atmosphere he loved, to hone his clinical skills, to achieve academic excellence and to be of service to the

poor and the needy. During his post-graduate training, he was identified by the CMC administration as a gifted doctor and an excellent clinician, and was invited to join the faculty. But Ashok's interest was in Gastroenterology, and so he moved from Medicine and joined the MNAMS, and, shortly afterwards, the DM training program. The Department of Gastroenterology at CMC under the leadership of the renowned pioneer, Professor V. I. Mathan, was in its infancy at that time. Ashok soon became an important, integral part of the department and set about the task of building up the department and the specialty. He completed DM (Gastro.) in 1983.

On joining the Department of Gastroenterology, his area of special research interest was in nutrition and dietary fiber. He went to work with Dr. John Cummings, a pioneer in research on dietary fiber, at the Dunn Clinical Nutrition Center, University of Cambridge in 1984. He took up the fermentation of protein in the colon as his area of focus and looked at the ileal effluent as a substrate for protein fermentation. He attempted to get a nitrogenous substance into the cecum without using tubes as the existing system was invasive and cumbersome for subjects. He used the Osmet pump and performed its *in-vitro* and *in-vivo* validation.

Ashok returned to CMC in 1986 and worked with great passion as the Department of Gastroenterology grew and diversified. In 1990, he took up the leadership of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy, and set up a state-of-the-art diagnostic and therapeutic endoscopy service. His special interest has been in pancreatobiliary diseases and has been a very important member of several national initiatives, workshops and task force groups. He has set up an excellent molecular genetics laboratory and is collaborating with Dr. J. H. Drenth of the Radboud University in Netherlands to study the genetics of chronic pancreatitis.

Teaching and training have been his forte over the years. He has trained 64 higher specialty trainees for the DM degree in Gastroenterology. He also has trainees from several other Universities, for short term training in CMC to help them acquire knowledge and skills in Gastroenterology.

Dr. Chacko is an examiner for both DM and DNB examinations, in many national universities. He is a much-sought-after speaker at conferences. He was awarded the degree of Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians by the London and Glasgow colleges in recognition of his academic and professional excellence.

He is the President of the Indian Medical Association of the Vellore CMC Branch and has worked tirelessly to promote awareness of gastrointestinal and liver diseases and their prevention in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. As an Inspector for the National Board, he has played an important role in accrediting institutions of quality for DNB training in Gastroenterology.

Ashok's patients follow him everywhere. He is a caring, compassionate physician who reaches out to his patients with empathy. I have watched him with admiration as he deals with his patients. It is not just excellent communication skills—it much more than that. It is the heart and the

mind to put himself in the shoes of the patient. Ashok is, therefore, an ideal mentor for trainees and those aspiring to be doctors, as he 'walks the talk'.

He has been an excellent administrator and leader. In 1996 he became the Head of Department of Gastroenterology. As Vice-Principal of CMC, Vellore and as Associate Director for Human Resources, I was witness to his amazing leadership and organization skills. He played an important role in the recent growth of our institution, which has become one of the leading healthcare and academic institutions in the country.

Most importantly, Ashok is a man of deep faith and prayer. His deep commitment, sense of purpose and passion for excellence makes him the ideal leader for our society this year. His dynamism, courage and spirit of innovation will help the society to grow even further. My prayers go with him and the society as he takes up this exciting challenge.

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