

A Slice of Life



PHOTOGRAPH: IN TOUCH GRAPHICS

# NO Gain WITHOUT Pain

BY RAJINDER PAL SINGH

How I wish I had paid heed to my family doctor's warnings about my ever increasing girth. "Rajinder," he said, "You really need to do something about that weight." Of course he was harking on heart disease, and diabetes, and the usual stuff. I don't think that even he, in his wildest dreams, would have thought that my

overweight could spawn a far more deadly enemy: Cancer!

You see, my vast waist hid in its folds a huge tumor, about the size of a football, which even the X-rays could not uncover totally because of the fat that shrouded it.

But I'm getting ahead of my story. Let me begin at the beginning, when the first spot of trouble raised its ugly head.



## FLASHBACK AND A CRISIS

It was the year 1987. I was 37 years old, married, and managing the family business, an automobile parts shop in Kurla. On the side, I was studying for the tough intermediate exams of C.A. Although I was already a commerce and LLB graduate, I felt this additional qualification would help me get ahead in my career faster. And I was always fond of studying as it were.

I still remember the day in May '87 clearly; how can I forget it, it changed my whole life!

The morning of the exam I woke up to a severe pain and swelling in my right leg, so bad that I could not get out of the bed. I lay there alternately screaming for help and praying. My wife, Amit rushed to my side fearing that an old nightmare had returned. Four years ago, I had had a similar pain and was diagnosed as having a condition called *hemangioma*, a cluster of inflamed blood vessels in my right knee that was causing the pain. I had been operated upon and the cluster removed, and later autopsied. The autopsy results had declared it to be benign and we had thought little about it after that.

But now, when the similar pain returned, all our old fears came rushing back with it. For a moment I wondered whether the diagnosis that the cluster was benign was wrong, and maybe it was actually malignant and had returned with a vengeance. The thought was really scary and I forced myself not to think on such morbid lines and instead focus on what was happening now. My family rushed me to our physician, Dr. B C Mehta, who gave me some medicines to reduce the swelling. But they did not help. So he suggested that I consult Dr. Devendra Saxsena, a vascular surgeon in Bombay Hospital. Dr. Saxsena asked me to get a *vineography* done, as he suspected that I was suffering from a condition called Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT).

I was under Dr. Saxsena's care as an out patient from May to October 1987 with little success. So he finally decided to get me admitted to the St. George hospital for heparin treatment for the inflammation.

For the next 21 days, I was in the hospital with my right leg strung up like a goat readied for slaughter, and I was given one heparin injection daily. But all this had no effect on my swollen leg. As long as it was up, the swelling would disappear. As soon as I set my foot on the ground and walked a few paces, the oedema would come right back.

By now my family members were getting tired of the whole affair,

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seeing that I was benefiting little. And even the doctors began to suspect that something else was the matter.

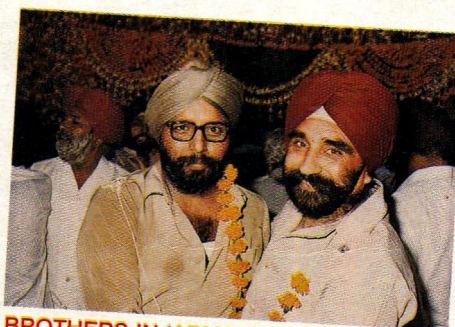
Dr. Saxsena suggested that I meet Dr. P K Jhavar, general surgeon, also at the Bombay Hospital.

It was then that the bombshell fell!

Dr. Jhavar had me undergo a sonography. From the results, he discerned a football-sized object in my *stomach(!)* which was very hazy. But he was more or less convinced that it was a tumor and for further confirmation he told me to go in for a needle biopsy. That would tell us whether the mass was malignant or benign.

So all this while I had been limping around with a time bomb ticking away inside me, and I had not even known it. At first I was very afraid. After all, this was happening to a person who had never known a day's illness apart from the hemangioma. And, in any case, the word *tumor*, and one that size, in itself spelled trouble. So I had enough reason to feel uneasy. The most galling fact was that as I was always stout around the stomach, there was no way a doctor could have

seen a tumor that size on a cursory examination. What baffled everyone was that there were no outward signs to show that I had a *massive* and deadly tumor growing inside me: I had not lost my appetite, I was as active as ever, nor had I come down



**BROTHERS IN 'ARMS':** Rajinder with his younger brother at the latter's wedding, before his illness

with any other illness which could give the doctor a clue that something was not as it should be.

After a while my old optimistic self reasserted itself. It had to, the rest of my family were so distraught and shattered that there had to be someone to think clearly! I was always an intensely religious man and when I heard the diagnosis, I told myself and my family, "This is not a death sentence. People do survive cancer. If God has given me this (the tumor), then he will take it away from me too." This belief in the Supreme Being was what buoyed me and helped me to fight the monsters which plagued me for the best part of the next few years.

My wife Amit went into a stupor when she heard the diagnosis. She told me later that when Dr Jhavar gave her the news, she was rendered



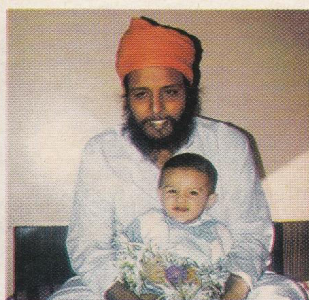
speechless for so long that he came and sat next to her in an attempt to assuage her fears. He said "Amit, do you know

what exactly is wrong with your husband? Rajinder has a tumor, a big one that is pressing on the nerves of his right leg and causing the swelling. Are you aware of what is to be done now and how you will care for him?" He then explained to Amit the whole procedure in detail and how long it will take for me to recover. That was the kind of man he was, always caring and conscious of his patients' dilemmas. All through my ordeal he was like the Rock of Gibraltar, supportive and there when we needed him.

With the discovery of the tumor inside me, started another round of hospital visits. At the Tata Memorial Hospital, where I had to submit samples of my tumor, twice they told me that it was inadequate and twice I had to submit myself to the painful procedure of needle biopsy. Even then, in the end they could not confirm whether the tumor was malignant or benign before the operation was due.



**BRAVE HEART:** Despite chemotherapy, Rajinder maintains a cheerful demeanour



knew what was wrong with me. The nurse went away looking both incredulous and happy at the same time!

They spoiled and pampered me as if I were a child and I

revelled in all that attention. If I had any fears — and I did — nobody knew about them. In fact Amit tells me now that I looked so upbeat that she, and the rest of the family, did not dare to reveal their misery.

Around the time when I was to be discharged, Dr. Jhavar informed us that though he had tried to remove all the traces of the tumor, there could be roots remaining so I would have to take chemotherapy to kill them.

The news that there might be further agony ahead did nothing for my by now sagging morale. I had visions of a hairless, emaciated me, throwing up all over the place and too weak to leave the bed for anything!

Here again, Dr. Jhavar came to our rescue. He laid at rest all my fears about the side-effects of chemotherapy. He told me to meet Dr. Asha Kapadia, oncologist at the Hinduja Hospital, who was noted for giving such an effective cocktail of chemotherapy drugs that her patients never felt the supposed side effects of the procedure.

And how right he was.

Dr Kapadia put me on a six-month cycle of chemotherapy called the CHOP therapy, which she said was the gold standard for Non-Hodgkin's type of lymphoma.

And throughout the treatment, not once did I suffer from any of the dreaded attacks of nausea. Even my appetite remained the same. All that happened was that I lost most of my hair, and was almost as bald as an eagle for a good part of those six months. But that didn't affect me greatly. I even attended my youngest sister's wedding in Jammu in that hairless state and took part in all the festivities. My relatives were very confused. They knew that I was very ill, but they saw me dancing at the wedding and began to doubt the reports. They fussed over me, telling me to take it easy. But I brushed aside their fears. After all, my sister was getting married and I wasn't going to let one silly tumor take away the pleasure of the occasion!

Dr Kapadia was of the view that the reason I did not have nausea and other problems was perhaps because I had

approached her treatment with confidence and was not as anxious as some of the other cancer victims who had suffered side effects. Being

## TEARS AND FEARS

Since time was running out Dr. Jhavar decided to carry out the procedure anyway.

I was operated upon in the Bombay Hospital on 11th November, 1987, and it took the doctors three hours to take the whole tumor out. Later they told me that the thing was so big, they could not remove it all out in one piece. They had to cut it in three pieces before it came out fully. That was a humbling thought indeed!

The tumor was sent to three different hospitals for individual biopsies, and we learnt finally that it was indeed malignant and that I had a cancer called Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

I remained in the hospital for another 15 days and became a favourite with all the nurses and attendants. They could not believe that I had been so ill from my cheerful manner. One of the nurses asked my wife, "How is Mr Rajinder related to you?" When Amit replied that I was her husband, she said, "Does he know what is wrong with him? He behaves as if he has come in here for a treatment for a cold!

I'm sure you people have not told him about his condition." Amit assured her that I was educated enough to read my medical reports and

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positive had the same effect as biofeedback. This was why I was in a better state.

The chemotherapy finally got over in the month of June, 1988 and Dr Kapadia pronounced me fit and out of danger. She only wanted me to come back to her once in a while for a check up. She also said that the tumor was totally wiped out and there was only 5 percent chance of it returning.

The long treatment and the chemotherapy had taken a toll on my physical strength and I could not rejoin the family business, at least for the time being. "But," I thought to myself, "After two or three months I will be able to share the workload and relieve my father and brothers of the stress they have been under." I had been ill so long that everyone had put their life on hold. The entire burden of the business and taking care of me and my family had fallen on their shoulders. And they had borne everything without complaint. But now that all my travails were over, I could start work again. So I happily resigned myself to their ministrations for what I thought would be the last time, and started making sure I got well and regained strength soon.

And so it carried on into the next year. I could not go out much, so I opted to sit at home and help my brothers in doing the accounts of both our shops, something that I was trained in.

Days went by with me carrying on a now familiar routine of getting up at the first light of dawn, earlier than anyone else, with the exception of my father. A bath and an hour's prayers later, when the rest of the household were roused, I would have breakfast with the family. After the men left for work, I would either sit with my mother and grandmother or go back to the tally sheets. If there was no work, then I would help out my brothers' children with their studies, especially maths, my favourite subject. They learned to hold me in fear, because even though I am good with children, I could lose patience very quickly, so they were subjected to many a whack on the head each time their attention wandered.

## ...THE WORST WAS YET TO COME

rather, I tried to. Because as I turned to get out of the bed, the nightmare struck!

An excruciating pain shot up my right leg, so bad that I could not even raise a foot, leave alone

The year wore on and soon enough it was Diwali day in October 1989. As was my daily routine for so many years, I rose early. Or

**"My first thought was that maybe I was in that unlucky statistic of 5 percent in whom the cancer returned, and the thought chilled my very marrow"**

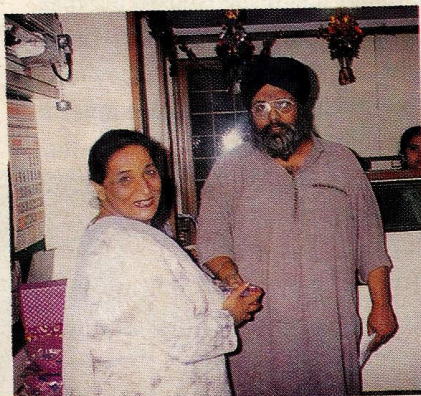
my body. My first thought was that maybe I was in that unlucky statistic of 5 percent in whom the cancer returned, and the thought chilled my very marrow. My wife was also not there, she had gone to attend the last rites of a cousin's death in Calcutta, so it was left to my brothers to take me to the doctor. All the festivities were put aside as they rushed me to Dr Mehta, our mainstay for so many years.

Then started all over again the flurry of visits to the hospitals, where doctors poked and probed my right knee, which by now had become almost a medical mystery, so many things had happened to it.

We lay people tend to think that doctors are like God. When you present them with a problem, you expect them to zero in on its cause, and also arrive at the solutions with the help of their superior knowledge. It is only when you, as a

patient, are batted from one specialist to another do you realise that they are as unsure as the rest of us, and they can't even agree with each other on a diagnosis, let alone the solution. Which is how you end up becoming a victim caught in their wiles.

I was thoroughly sickened by the repeated visits to various doctors, all of whom gave frightful



**NOTHING VENTURED, NOTHING GAINED :** Rajinder with a customer in his consultancy

prognoses and warnings that I may have to lose a limb.

At last we were put onto Dr A V Bavadekar, an orthopaedic surgeon who correctly diagnosed my problem as *osteomyelitis*, an infection of the bone. He was of the view that the knee had to be operated upon quickly as my immune system had already been compromised considerably from the earlier illnesses, which could give easy access to further infection. He said that although the wound would never heal as long as I live (it had penetrated so deep into my body), once the bits of dead bone were removed, it (the infection) could be restricted to a small area of the leg. Then I would only need to keep the site clean with daily changes of dressing.

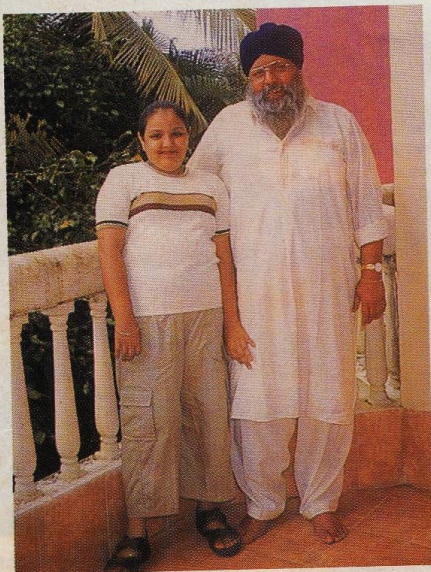
Dr. Bavadekar admonished us for contemplating amputation. "What is wrong with you people?" he said.

"Why do you want to spoil a perfectly healthy man's life by taking away one leg? The infection is confined to a particular



site and is not spreading. True, he will suffer some pain, but it won't be so bad that he'll be incapacitated. He will be able to carry on with his normal work, so why don't you let it be?"

The operation was carried out at Hinduja Hospital under orthopedic surgeon Sanjay Agarwala's care. Here too, ill luck seemed to dog me, as even after taking a couple of X-rays, the doctors could not determine the exact site of the infection. So they opened up one side of the knee, found it healthy, and then did the whole thing all over again on the other side.



But the operation was finally over and I was sent home with the caution that though the dead bone parts were out, the infection was still there and to keep it under control. So it bleeds to this day, like a factory constantly producing pus and blood, which I daily clean and bandage.

## SELF RECRIMINATION

Following the operation for this latest in the series of afflictions that befell me, started what I would call the darkest period of my life. The infection had rendered me, for all practical purposes,

bedridden all over again. I had been in this state for so long, first because of the tumor and now the osteomyelitis, that it became near hell for both me and my family.

I must have been the most irritable person to live with in all those years of my illness. Perhaps I had good reason to be: I was spending the most productive years of my life confined to a bed; I was dependent on my family for everything; and, worst of all, I was idle. The maximum useful contribution I made was an occasional visit to the auto parts shop, and that too, only if my parents allowed me. It was enough to drive the sanest of men mad. You see, I am one of those driven, totally self reliant individuals who hates being dependent on anyone. And here I was,

**"X-rays could not help determine the exact site of infection. So they opened up one side of the knee, found it healthy, and then did the whole thing all over again on the other side"**

living on the mercy of my parents and brothers, not just for a day or two, but for almost 5 years. What is it about dependency that makes a man feel so awful, so diminished, as if his very self worth has been taken away from him? I cannot analyse it, but I can tell you, it's not a nice feeling.



### JOY OF TOGETHERNESS:

(left) Rajinder with his daughter on a vacation in Goa. (right) At home celebrating a birthday party

Yet it wasn't fair on the others, to be forced to put up with my moods and ill temper. Especially Amit, on whom I gave vent to most of my feelings. She had the twin burdens of seeing me suffer as well as deal with her own

depression. Sick people tend to get very self-centred and often cannot see beyond their own problems, and aches and pains.

To make matters worse, there were the subtle psychological wars that are waged in every family — wars that are never overtly stated but which exist nevertheless. I had always put my parents on a pedestal, to be revered and venerated, never to be argued with or questioned. In the beginning of my marriage, I had told Amit, "I have to make this very clear to you, any argument between you and me, you win. But any argument between you and my parents, they are right!" And so it was.

After my series of health crises, my parents became extra protective of me and would barely heed anybody else's opinion. They formed a protective ring around me, from which even Amit was often excluded. And I helped exacerbate the situation by conforming to their wishes. This is what guilt does to a man. It makes him lose all sense of balance, reason and common sense. I am ashamed to say that I never once guessed at what Amit was going through. She now admits to me that thoughts of suicide did cross her mind when things became too much. At times, she says, she used to feel like an outsider in the house of the man

whom she had vowed to spend her life with. Even today, I can barely comprehend the depth of her anguish, on the one



hand wanting to help me so much but unable to because no-one was ready to listen to her; and on the other having to hear to me yell at her all the time.

## A NEW BEGINNING

As my condition improved, the tensions disappeared. A day came when I was well enough to manage on my own. My painful knee condition prevented me from doing strenuous work, so going back to the family business was ruled out completely: I would have to be on my feet all day to attend to customers, and may even be required to lift heavy objects like tyres, an absolute no-no for me. So I cast around for options, and eventually, in 1992, started out as an investments consultant in the godown where my brothers kept the supplies for the shops. I called it 'Evergrowth Investments'.

And suddenly, it seemed, the goddess of fortune was smiling upon me. I started out as a small-time consultant, more intent on passing my time than doing any real business, but very soon it grew to such a degree that I had customers coming from as far as Goa.

And so it continues to this day: I get up in the morning at around 4.30, vying with my dad for the best bathroom, have a bath, spend an hour in prayer at the Gurudwara and am back by about 8, by which time the family is up and we all have breakfast together. A major task of the day is dressing the wound on my knee. Like I mentioned before, it will not heal and bleeds constantly. So I have to be very careful of how I bandage it so that it stays in place the whole day. Every morning, after my bath, I clean the wound with *Savlon*, then I put a layer or two of cotton before finally bandaging it with yards of guaze. Yet by the evening, the bandages are soaked and even my pajamas get stained with blood. On the days I have to go out, I take extra precautions, put in extra padding but it rarely ever helps. Recently, I had to go with a friend only as far as the Mahim beach, which is close to my house. I knew that standing for more than 10 minutes will cause the wound to open so I had put lots of cotton before going out. Even so, by the time we had finished our work, my pajamas were soaked at the knee and, to top it all, a mini crowd had collected with people wondering what had suddenly

happened to this burly *sardarji*, and each one offering bits of advice and sympathy!

With the knee hampering me I cannot move around too much, so we rarely go out. I do not stop Amit, but she is reluctant to attend gatherings without me, so she stays at home, too. It's not a very satisfactory arrangement, after all, who wants to stay at home for days on end, and there is so much that she cannot do, no walks on the beach, no holidays every year, but Amit does not complain. On the contrary, she says that she wouldn't exchange this life even for the times we have had in the past. Because, according to her, my ailments have changed me and that today, I am a better person. "I have seen you in three different phases," she says. "In the beginning, when we were just married, you were the typical Indian Husband, autocratic, aloof, austere, formal. Then, when you were ill

— grouchy, angry, sullen, frustrated, in pain. And now, when everything has turned for the better — happy, kind, loving, considerate. I am happy because now I truly know that you are the person I want to spend the rest of my life with."

So now you know why I never let a day go by without thanking my Creator for all that He has given me. A cynic might say — *Ah, but He gave*

*you the cancer and all these health problems, too.* But the way I see it is this: I may have lost some of my good health, but I've gained so much more in terms of true happiness. You could say, I *found* myself again. It takes a crisis for one to dig deep into one's soul and learn things about oneself. 20 years ago I would have been fearful of even nicking a finger — *Oh, the pain!* Today I know that I'm capable of bearing pain that's a thousand fold more. And not just for just a day or two, or even a few months or years, but *life long*.

When you are sentenced to excruciating pain every day of your life, it can affect a person's psyche. Some souls may get warped. Others get tougher. I believe in the old saying that says no one ever gets more pain than he can bear. That is what helps me keep the faith.

As told to  
ANJALI TRIPATHI



**SWEET SUCCESS:** Displaying the trophy he received from LIC for being one of the most successful agents

**"I may have lost some of my good health, but I've gained so much more in terms of true happiness"**