

Letter to Editor: Celebrating the “Ostād”



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Dear Editor

I read with interest the report by Drs. Khan and Zeinalizadeh entitled “A Tribute to Dr. Seyed Ali Fakhri Tabatabaei: A Legendary Neurosurgeon” [1]. I would like to commend the authors on celebrating a person who in my opinion was and continues to be “the greatest mentor of neurosurgery” at the oldest Neurosurgical Department in Iran. As the above-mentioned report touches upon several aspects of Dr. Tabatabaei’s life from a colleague’s perspective, I felt obligated to write a few on the influence of Dr. Tabatabaei from the vantage point of a former junior medical student and resident.

Ten years into my neurosurgical practice, I still vividly recollect my first year in medical school attending Dr. Tabatabaei’s neuroanatomy classes. I remember the large lecture hall in the Department of Anatomy at Tehran University of Medical Sciences where his classes were held. I recall him wearing an immaculate suit and lecturing on neuroanatomy with utmost passion. He had this simplified yet extremely organized mental picture of neuroanatomical pathways as he used a piece of chalk to draw them on the blackboard, connecting the clinical and anatomical dots, making the subject both simple and extremely complex. In fact, his only means of teaching advanced neuroanatomy was that blackboard. Yes, no slides! But he had such a clear picture of practical neuroanatomy and made it so tangible and

easy to understand that I did not feel anything else was necessary for his lectures. He used to combine relevant clinical examples with the pictorial demonstration of the tracts. This approach planted the seed of “the love for neurosurgery” in my mind. He was a vigorous fan of neuroanatomical eponyms in the era of “no Internet” where no one could “Search” terms such as Wisberg’s nerve, Deiters’ tract and Vicq d’Azyr’s fasciculus. This encouraged the interested medical student to spend hours delving into the indices of anatomical and neurological textbooks to find more about the story behind those elusive eponyms. Those hours are still valuable to me as a young neurosurgeon as they contributed to my fund of knowledge, thanks to his teachings.

Dr. Tabatabaei’s impact on my academic life was so profound that I never thought about any specialty as my career other than neurosurgery. Starting as a junior resident in the department of neurosurgery at Tehran University of Medical Sciences, I met him again as the chairman. It was during those residency years that his figure changed in my perspective from a teacher to a mentor. As junior residents, we used to spend endless hours with him in the clinic. He was so dedicated and committed to his profession that I still cannot think of any other neurosurgeon in my life to match him in that regard. Particularly impressive about him was his dedication to teach the “non-operative” skills in neurosurgery. I remember him repeating every day “Learning how to operate is easy; you are smart residents and will learn

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that readily. What I feel more obliged to teach you is to know when NOT to operate!" I have to admit this point still is the main crux of my approach in neurosurgery to avoid complications and helping patients in the most meaningful way. Approaching surgical candidates on a daily basis in my life, one question never leaves my mind and I have it from him: "What would Dr. Tabatabaei do about this patient? Would he operate on them or not?"

Later during mid-level and senior residency years, I used to spend time with him in the operating room. Every Tuesday, we spent long hours assisting him with complex cranial operations including but not limited to aneurysm clippings, trans-sphenoidal approaches, and acoustic neuroma resections. No surprise he was a technically gifted surgeon with impeccable dexterity. Before starting surgery, we had a short class or to be more accurate a quiz-class where he gave us this short test with a predetermined topic. In the endless duty hours of residency, those tests were a constant trigger for us the residents to read. But more crucially, I believe it was another point that kept him doing this; he used to reiterate "One tiny point could save a life!".

Finally, his dedication to self-criticism was exemplary. Our small department with only 2 operating rooms, 5 faculty members and 6 residents was a very busy one with about 1000 cases a year. Needless to say, we also had complications. As the head of the department, he took morbidity and mortality sessions seriously. In the era of no fancy means of lecturing like PowerPoint slideshows and without any PACS (Picture Archiving and Communication System), the chief resident had to keep the record for the "Morbidity and Mortality" in a small notebook. We discussed those cases with him every week in short sessions which eventually turned into root cause analysis sessions. His dedication to self-criticism indoctrinated this concept in the very last neuron in the residents' heads; something that I am personally proud of and keeps me feel I am alive in the ocean of neurosurgery.

In short, Dr. Tabatabaei met every single criterion for who we call "Ostād" in Persian language –rightfully and not surprisingly, "Ostād" was his nickname within the entire department both among the residents and the faculty members. "Ostād" is crudely synonymous to the word "Maestro" but has more to it. It means the person who is at the pinnacle of the craft, the crème de la crème of the profession and a lodestar for the mentees to look up to. Dr. Tabatabaei was truly "The Ostād". A big sincere "thank you" to the Ostād, and I wish him a long and happy life, and hope more trainees benefit from his mastery of the art of neurosurgery.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

As there is no animal or human research reported in this letter, there was no need for ethics board approval.

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Conflict of interest

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- [1] Hussain Khan Z, Zeinalizadeh M. A tribute to Dr. Seyed Ali Fakhri Tabatabaei: A legendary neurosurgeon. *The Iranian Journal of Neurosurgery*. 2020; 6(3):105-12. [DOI:10.32598/irjns.6.3.1]

