

DR. MAHARAJ KISHAN BHAN
(9 NOVEMBER 1947 - 26 JANUARY 2020)



Dr. M.K. Bhan was an outstanding pediatrician and clinical scientist of the highest order, who passed away on 26 January this year, aged 72 years, losing his prolonged battle against cancer.

Dr. Bhan obtained his MBBS in 1969 from the Armed Forces Medical College, Pune and MD from the Post-graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh. He carried out post-doctoral studies in the area of childhood diarrhoeal diseases at the prestigious All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi.

As Secretary of the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) from 2004 to 2012, he dramatically transformed the Indian biotechnology landscape through his visionary ideas and innovative initiatives. He was instrumental in setting up the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), which encouraged more academia-industry partnerships and collaborative research. He also played a key role in bringing international funding to India, through collaborations with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), USA and the Wellcome Trust, UK. The Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance was also made possible through his untiring efforts.

He was also an institution builder and developed the field of translational research by founding the Translational

Health Science and Technology Institute (THSTI) in 2009 at Faridabad, Haryana. The primary objective of THSTI is to translate laboratory research findings into clinical practice, essentially by bringing health interventions from 'bench to bedside'. Establishment of THSTI clearly showed that he had a global vision, while still being rooted in India. He also played a key role in establishing the Centre for Stem Cell Research (CSCR) at the Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore, which was followed by establishment of the Institute for Stem Cell Science and Regenerative Medicine (inStem) and Centre for Cellular and Molecular Platforms (C-CAMP) in Bengaluru, under his close supervision.

Dr. Bhan was a highly decorated and outstanding medical scientist, who received numerous accolades, the most notable being the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize in Science and Technology (1990), the Pollin Prize for Pediatric Research (2003), the Genome Valley Excellence Award (2013), and the Padma Bhushan (2013).

He was a Fellow of the National Academy of Medical Sciences, New Delhi and a Fellow of the National Academy of Sciences, Bengaluru. He was also a Member of the Advisory Committee of the Indian Science News Association (ISNA) for a long time.

He will be best remembered for the development of India's first indigenous rotavirus vaccine, ROTAVAC® in collaboration with Hyderabad-based biotechnology company, Bharat Biotech International Ltd. This vaccine uses the live rotavirus 116E strain, which was isolated and characterized by Dr. Bhan in the mid 1980s at AIIMS. This vaccine, which was licensed in 2014 for use in India, has been instrumental in saving the lives of thousands of children suffering from rotavirus diarrhoea, which kills 78,000 infants annually in India. He also provided leadership and advocacy for the promotion of oral rehydration therapy and micronutrient supplementation, which are also life-saving interventions for children.

Dr. Bhan was a thorough gentleman through and through and foremost, a great humanist. He had a pleasant personality and was always cheerful and energetic. Despite his high stature, he was readily accessible, even to junior scientists for help and advice. Most importantly, he was a wonderful human being. He will be fondly remembered by all those who were closely associated with him, including the author of this piece. □

***Dr. Kaushik Bharati, PhD, MIPHA, FRSPH (London)
Former Senior Program Officer
Translational Health Science and Technology Institute
(THSTI), NCR Biotech Science Cluster, Faridabad,
Haryana, India
e-mail : dr.kaushik.bharati@gmail.com***