

# The Retrospective

*From Barracks to Medical City*

Prof Yatish Agarwal

Let's begin with the beginning of a beginning, the twilight of the dawn, the year 1942. Dark clouds, billowing with smoke of World War II, were hanging heavy over the Eastern hemisphere. The China-Burma-India Theater was a burning cauldron. The axis combat forces were in full battle cry. Men and material were going up in flames, hearts were being torn asunder, and, for the affected, life could not be the same again. Yet, out of this melting pot of unholy fire, human flesh and man's devious designs, sprung many tales man is proud to narrate. The birth of Safdarjung Hospital is a story such as this.

With the casualties mounting and the end of war nowhere in sight, the injured soldiers of the allied forces needed emergency treatment. The US Army Medical Corps and the Air Force Medical Divisions were working 24 × 7. The Army had built many field hospitals, station hospitals and general hospitals for the sick and injured. Of them, one was the 100th Station Hospital in Delhi.



# 1942-1945



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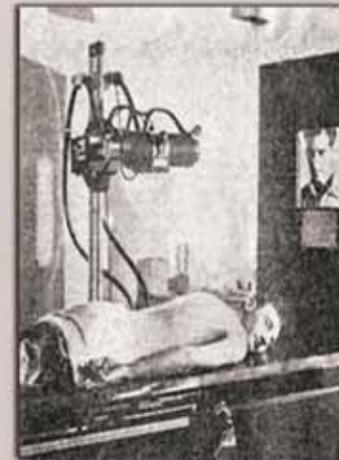
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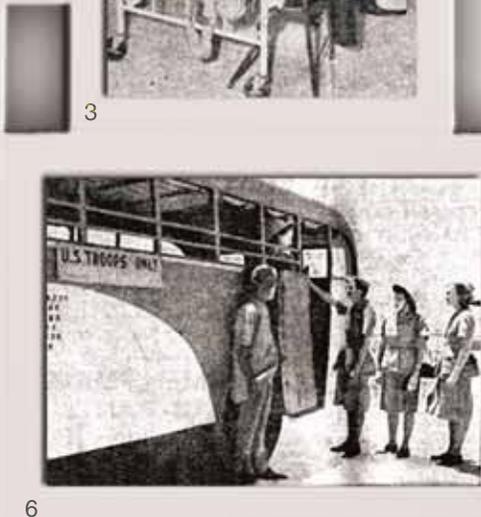


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1 ▶ World War II, 1942. The China-Burma-India Theater was in the midst of a hard fought war. 2 ▶ Col Robert P Williams, General Stilwell's staff surgeon, and 3 ▶ Col John M Tamraz relocated to Delhi in 1942. 4 ▶ Under their guidance, the 100th Station Hospital was erected for the US Army soldiers. The Indian stone masons worked laboriously day in and day out to erect the hospital building. 5 ▶ Pvt Arnold L Olson takes a stock of the drugs in the hospital pharmacy. 6 ▶ The entrance to the 100th Station Hospital. Staffed by expert doctors and nurses and equipped with the best gadgets of the time, the hospital handled US patients from the entire war theater. 7 ▶ A peek into the surgical ward! 2nd Lt. Ruth M Howe changes the dressing on a serviceman injured in an air crash. 8 ▶ 1st Sgt Marvin T Hunn lies prone on the X-ray table, while Corp Emanuel B Rivera peers down at him from behind the lead glass window before pressing the exposure button. Capt Writer has asked for that awful barium meal study!



1 ▶ The injured soldiers were airlifted to the 100th Station Hospital, Delhi. The city's aerodrome, named Willingdon Airfield, was situated less than a mile from the 100th Station Hospital. 2 ▶ An injured soldier being brought for treatment. 3 ▶ Checking the ticker! Capt Ivan W Scott auscultates the heart of Capt Frank H Waskow. Capt Robert S Crew is by his side. 4 ▶ A ward in the barracks. 5 ▶ Surgeons hard at work in the operating room. 6 ▶ The nurses travelled by bus back and forth between town and the hospital. Janet E Conklin is in the vehicle while Elizabeth Shaunty, Monica L Gabel and Jane D Marsden line up to get in. 7 ▶ A public appeal issued by the US Army Nurses Corps urging young women to enroll and serve the injured and sick US soldiers. 8 ▶ The Coffee Hour. Miss Betty Luce, of the American Red Cross, served a steaming cup of coffee at 10 am daily to the patients in the hospital.

## The American Hospital

Created in May 1942, the plan and construction of this 150 bedded hospital was supervised by many senior officers, including Col Robert P Williams, MC, who was General Stilwell's staff surgeon and had accompanied the General during his retreat on foot from Burma to India. With him was Col John M Tamraz, MC, who became the head of Services of Supply in Delhi in April 1942. The key task Col Tamraz was entrusted with was to establish the station and general hospitals. During the first half of 1942, the British gave hospitalization to 3,000 American troops in India.<sup>1,2</sup>

Strategically built close to the city's lone airstrip, the Willingdon Airfield (now known as Safdarjung Airport), a new hospital rose. Housed in army barracks, it was given the name of 100th Station Hospital.<sup>1-3</sup> People of the city called it the American Hospital. The hospital salvaged many brave lives. Several American doctors worked in the

hospital.<sup>3</sup> Of them, Dr T Proper, who passed away in 1962, and had been a fellow of the American College of Surgeons, commanded the hospital in 1944.<sup>4</sup>

The War ended, and soon, India became independent, a master of her own destiny. In 1954, the Government of India decided to dedicate the wartime American hospital to her people.

## The Birth

With its portals thrown open to the public, the hospital received a new name. It came to be called Safdarjung, after the Mogul general Abul Mansur Mirza Muhammad Muqim Ali Khan, who ascended the throne of Oudh on 19 March 1739, and was bestowed the title of Safdarjung by the Mogul Emperor Muhammad Shah.<sup>5</sup> A fine connoisseur of art, culture and education, Abul Mansur Mirza established many institutions of charity, seats of



1 ▶ Obituary of Dr T Proper, in Evening News, New York edition, July 9, 1962. Dr Proper was a fellow of the American College of Surgeons, and commanded the hospital in 1944. 2 ▶ Freedom at the stroke of midnight. The Prime Minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru, makes a stirring speech to the nation. 3 ▶ The Times of India celebrates the Birth of India's Freedom: 15th August, 1947. 4 ▶ A ward in those years. 5 ▶ Mogul general Abul Mansur Mirza Safdarjung, the second Nawab of Oudh, after whom the hospital is named. 6 ▶ Since the 1950s, the hospital has been a major academic hub. The first batches of medical students of All India Institute of Medical Sciences took their clinical training in Safdarjung Hospital (representative picture).



**1** ▶ In the mid-1950s, Safdarjung hospital was equipped with two specialized skull X-ray tables. History records, that of them, the hospital gifted one to the neurosurgery unit of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. **2** ▶ The Presidential Tour, March 21, 1972. President Shri VV Giri warmly meets the patients, staff members and doctors. **3** ▶ The President dedicated the new Emergency Block building of Safdarjung hospital to the nation. **4** ▶ The Emergency Block became a home to the University College of Medical Sciences. The college ran its pre-clinical branches in this block until 1989. The clinical training of the students was held in the wards of Safdarjung Hospital. **5** ▶ Prime Minister Pt Nehru shaking hands with the first medical superintendent Dr Col R Duraiswamy Ayyar. **6** ▶ Prime Minister Smt Indira Gandhi came to the hospital a number of times. During the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the President, Prime Minister, and Union Ministers commonly visited the Safdarjung Hospital for treatment.

learning and beautiful gardens and monuments.

Allied to Abul's halo of charity, creativity and fame, the newfound Safdarjung hospital began operations with a nucleus of 204 beds. Over time, it grew brick by brick, inch-by-inch, year by year. While still in its formative years, it became a Mecca for the sick. People came from far for treatment and healing. Legends grew, benefactors grew. Even the President, Prime Minister, and Union Ministers came to consult with the doctors in the hospital for their treatment. Soon, the hospital also became a clinical learning ground for young physicians.

### An Academic Hub

Since the 1950s, the hospital turned into a major academic hub. The clinical wards became the training ground for undergraduate, postgraduate and post doctoral medical students. The first batches of All India Institute

of Medical Sciences medical students owe their allegiance to Safdarjung— it was in the wards of this hospital that they picked up the first lessons in clinical skills.

In 1972, the newly built emergency block of the hospital became a home to the students of University College of Medical Sciences. The college functioned in these premises until 1989, and the students took their clinical training in the hospital. The college shifted between 1986 and 1989 to its new quarters in East Delhi. Many alumni of the college found global acclaim, and hold chairs of eminence in medical institutions all across the world.

### A Pilgrim's Progress

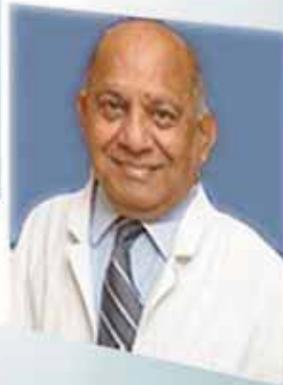
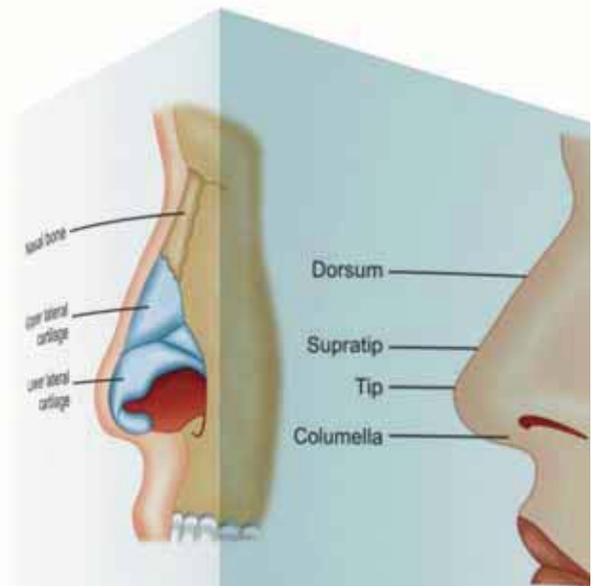
Safdarjung is today one of the world's largest public hospitals. Spread over a large land area of 160,300 square meters (47 acres), its mission is to deliver free or affordable healthcare to every child, woman and man; and



Dr Balu Sankaran, orthopedic surgeon par excellence. He founded the first rural rehabilitation training centre in Olatpur, Odisha in 1974-75. His surgical techniques were a part of the operative text in the celebrated work Campbell's Operative Orthopedics.

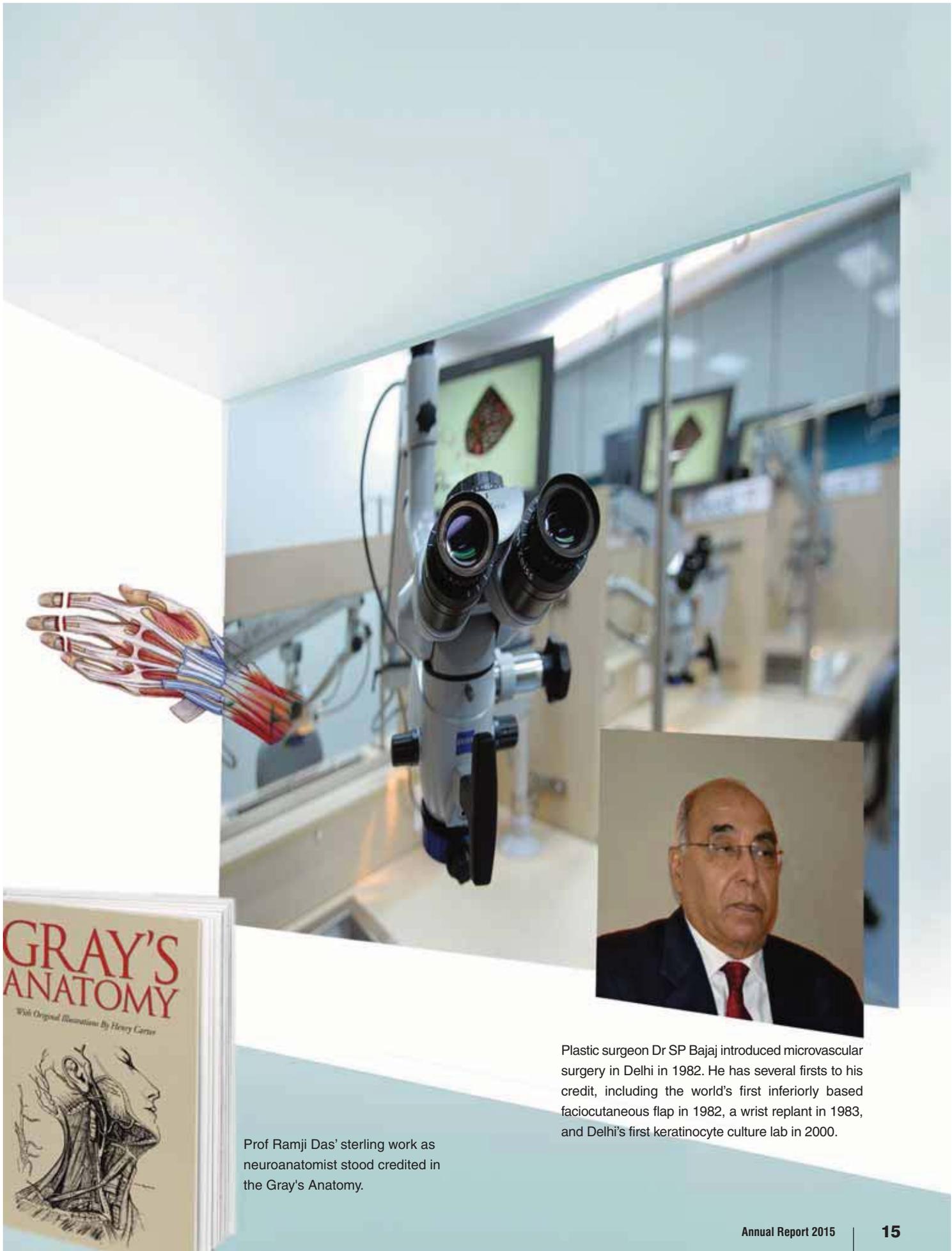


Pediatrician Dr Shanti Ghosh. She was the mother of neonatal medicine in India.



Dr PS Saharia developed a new incision technique for nasal septorhinoplasty in the early 1980s cutting down the failure rate.

# The Great Milestones



# GRAY'S ANATOMY

With Original Illustrations By Henry Carter



Prof Ramji Das' sterling work as neuroanatomist stood credited in the Gray's Anatomy.



Plastic surgeon Dr SP Bajaj introduced microvascular surgery in Delhi in 1982. He has several firsts to his credit, including the world's first inferiorly based faciocutaneous flap in 1982, a wrist replant in 1983, and Delhi's first keratinocyte culture lab in 2000.

provide world class medical education to young doctors who shall be the torchbearers of healthcare in this millennium.

The institution has a huge footfall. On most days of the year, the doctors of the hospital attend to more than 6,000 out patients, the wards are home to around 2,000 patients, and its 32 operation theatres and two labor rooms hum 24 × 7 with surgical procedures to tender people the best possible healthcare. Citizens from different parts of the country, and many neighboring countries, visit the hospital for treatment.

Despite the ills of a haphazard growth, outdated structures, narrow entrances, chockablock corridors, and overburdened wards and operation theatres; the unfriendly disconnect between facilities which force patients to trudge long distances within the hospital to access services; the insufficient public utilities: few public washrooms, few or no planned resting space for family members, no food courts, or utility centers, the institution continues to serve citizens with a missionary ardor. Blessed as it is, with the goodwill and faith of generation upon generations of people; a medical school—the Vardhman Mahavir Medical College; and serving as an invaluable clinical resource for postgraduate and postdoctoral medical students.

The people's faith and belief in the institution is strongly reflected in the numbers it draws each day to its outpatients' facilities, and the emergency and inpatient care services.

## The Great Milestones

Down the ages, many staff members of the hospital made legendary contributions to academics and patient care through their path-breaking work. The first name that springs to mind is of Prof Ramji Das. He headed the anatomy department in 1976, and gave us the first lessons in human anatomy. His seminal work in neuroanatomy stood credited in the bible of the days, Gray's Anatomy. A figure of simplicity and unabashed humility, he would often slip a doctor's apron directly over his undershirt.

Physiologist, Prof Ramesh Bijlani, was no less mercurial. A pensive saintly man, he would often pedal down to the hospital. His books and his seminal research on the positive role of yoga in prevention and management of coronary artery disease are a legend.

The Safdarjung of the 1960s-70s was home to one of India's best known pediatrician, Dr Shanti Ghosh. She mothered neonatal medicine in the country, and was instrumental in setting up the first such unit in the hospital.

The hospital was best known for a great pedigree of surgeons. Dr Col R Duraiswamy Ayyar, the first Medical Superintendent, was Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's favorite. The President, Prime Minister and many eminent political and social persona all were his patients.

The tradition was kept alive by the orthopedic surgeon Dr Puliur Duraiswami Krishnaswamy, who was honored with the Padma Bhushan in 1966.

Dr Balu Sankaran raised the bar still higher. A par excellence orthopedic surgeon, he returned to India



Aug 20, 1992. The Hon'ble Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Shri ML Fotedar, dedicated the outpatient department complex of Safdarjung Hospital to the people of India.

despite lucrative job offers in Canada and United States, where he had trained under the great masters. Sankaran's clinical acumen and operative skills were a legend. His surgical techniques were a part of Campbell's Operative Orthopedics. At the instance of the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, Sankaran founded the Artificial Limb Manufacturing Corporation of India. His pious mission was to expedite the rehabilitation of Bangladesh war victims through indigenous production of high quality orthotic and prosthetic devices. Two years later, he also undertook the initiative of setting up the first rural rehabilitation training centre, the Swami Vivekanand National Institute of Rehabilitation Training and Research in Olatpur, a village in Cuttack district of Odisha.

The first rural rehabilitation centre in the country was set up by a rehabilitation doctor of Safdarjung, Dr BP Yadav, who founded a centre in Kadipur village of Gurgaon district in Haryana in 1974.

Less than a decade later, orthopedic surgeon Prof Gopal Krishna Vishwakarma developed the technique of amniotic arthroplasty in tubercular hip using the more than abundant amnion from the hospital's overcrowded labor rooms. The year was 1982.

This was also the year when the plastic surgeon Prof SP Bajaj returned to India following some wonderful years of learning in the United Kingdom. Inspired and devoted to his homeland and countrymen, he became a legend in no time for his single-handed marathon microvascular surgeries. He performed the world's first

inferiorly based faciocutaneous flap on his first year of return, Delhi's first wrist replant the subsequent year, and the first free flap nose reconstruction using a dorsalis pedis flap the following year. With the first light of the new millennium, he established the first keratinocyte culture lab in the burns department, still the only one of its kind in Delhi. The lab was set up in collaboration with Dr Majumdar of the Indian Council of Medical Research.

The early 1980s were also witness to the birth of a new septorhinoplasty technique for the cartilaginous nasal septal defects. Otorhinolaryngologist PS Saharia modified the globally practiced Beekhul's procedure by employing an ingenious extramucosal incision and adding a spurectomy with remarkable benefit to the patients. Until now, Prof Saharia has performed over 3,000 such procedures, and his technique has found many followers among the ear, nose and throat surgeons.

The first sleep lab and pulmonary critical care unit in a North India public hospital was established in the mid 1980s in Safdarjung. A reflection of the avant-garde approach of Prof Jagdish C Suri, the state-of-art pulmonary lab and academic milieu in the unit has turned this into a hub of excellence. Suri is an alumnus of the institution, and has trudged this ground since the early 1970s.

The success stories are one too many, each a tribute to the devotion of those who have served this institution and the people well, and who would die to give it all despite an age-old failing infrastructure.



Dec 17, 2001. The Hon'ble Prime Minister, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, laid the foundation stone of Vardhman Mahavir Medical College in the hospital. Hon'ble Union Home Minister Shri LK Advani and Hon'ble Health Minister Dr CP Thakur were present on the occasion.

## The Dream

With India's economic growth engine chugging at a steady pace, the country is firmly set to grow into a developed economy. As this Cinderella story unveils, it is time the country's people-centric resources take a rebirth. The 60-year old campus of Safdarjung hospital must make way for a new world-class healthcare facility which can heal and nurse the sick in a caring, well-provided and friendly ambience.

A wise man once professed: think, believe, dream, and, finally, dare. The dream has spread wings, and a new sun has risen. An ultramodern aesthetic medical city, which would fulfil the needs of the patients, caregivers, physicians, nurses and healthcare personnel is in the making. Promising a caring, compassionate healing, and high quality healthcare for the patients and their families

and, at the same time, providing the physicians, medical students and researchers with a work environment that shall inspire new thought, brilliance, and excellence in patient care.

Set to develop into a world class medical facility, the old structures are being pulled down bit by bit, and are being replaced with new buildings and towers with ergonomic and aesthetic ultramodern structures, spacious centrally airconditioned interiors, and state-of-the-art healthcare facilities. The Sports Injury Center, created in 2010, has become an oasis of unequalled facilities. The new emergency block and super specialty block, which shall be opening their portals to the people of this land soon, mark the beginning of a renaissance.

Dreams come true, only if people dare, and kindle their dream with inspiration, courage, determination, and self-



belief. The melody has found a soul:

*Dare to dream  
Dare to fly  
Dare to be the ever chosen one to touch the sky  
Dare to reach  
Dare to rise  
Find the strength to set my spirit free  
Dare to dream, Oh*

*And the heart will shine like the sun  
A million voices together as one  
I believe, I believe, I believe, I believe.*<sup>6</sup>

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3. CBI Roundup. New Base Hospital is erected. 1(3): 2; Oct 1, 1942.

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5. Siddiqui, HA. History of Oudh: A Princely State of India. <http://www.indiancoins.8m.com/awadh/AwadhHist.html>

6. Begaud Paul, Corish Vanessa and Tester Wayne. Lyrics: Dare To Dream. Sung by Olivia Newton-John and John Farnham at the Sydney Olympics, 2000.

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An alumnus of the institution, Prof Yatish Agarwal has been associated with the Safdarjung Hospital as a student and teacher since 1976.



Nov 20, 2007. Hon'ble Vice President of India, Mohd. Hamid Ansari, unveiling the plaque to dedicate the new building of Vardhman Mahavir Medical College to the nation.