



An Abode of Compassion Karunashraya

by Jaishree

When hope for cure ceases, Karunashraya in Bengaluru exemplifies the philosophy of palliative care for the terminally ill, helping them learn to let go and face death with equanimity.

Meet Dr Nagesh Simha, former consultant surgeon at Manipal Hospital, who underwent the trauma of two renal transplants and six surgeries in 18 days!

And yet, today he is the moving spirit behind the setting up of Karunashraya ('abode of compassion' in Kannada) that provides professional palliative care to advanced cancer patients. The hospice is a joint endeavour of RC Bangalore Indiranagar (RCBI), RI District 3190, and Indian Cancer Society, Karnataka Chapter (ICSK).

The Genesis

Armed with the experience of organising cancer screening camps, RCBI under the then president Gurmeet Singh Randhawa, and ICSK formed the Bangalore Hospice Trust (BHT) in 1994. ICSK's Kishore Rao is the Chair, Randhawa the Managing Trustee and Simha the Medical Director.

The Trust began its services with a home care team that went around the city in a hired auto rickshaw, visiting homes of advanced cancer



“ No gloomy hospital gowns or visiting hours; they can walk into the recreation zone any time and watch television; celebrate festivals and have their favourite food on demand. ”

In these 15 years, thousands of patients have experienced its tender loving care and passed away peacefully, says Archana Ganesh, Head — Public Relations. The home care team too continues to be busy.

The word ‘serene’ acquires a new meaning here; every nook and corner is designed to invoke calmness and peace in one’s inner self — the greenery, water bodies aglow with waterfalls and chirping birds through background music. The music was the idea of Rtn Bhaskar who was passionate about the centre and afflicted with cancer, passed away here six years ago. The charity shop sells donated goods and the proceeds are used for hospice care. A prayer hall and morgue are adjacent to each other. These are meant for poor families who cannot arrange cremation and last rites for their loved ones immediately, explains Simha. Though life and death seem to walk hand in hand here, there is no sign of grimness in the air.

As Simha walks me around, I am deeply moved by the sight of a mother-son duo sitting by the poolside, gazing wordlessly at the fish. Dealing with hopelessness and death can take its toll on the patients and their care-givers. Live music by visiting volunteers offers a ‘diversion therapy,’ to refresh and energise them.

Food choices of the patients are noted down thrice a day in a meal register and cooked in the spacious

sophisticated kitchen. “We had a young boy who wanted masala dosa, hot and crisp, every day” recalls Archana. A mechanised laundry and a spacious auditorium are other features of this place.

The hospice goes all out to bring families together. “We once had a cancer patient who was terribly dejected. He had come to us on his own. And now he longed to see his son. We arranged a search party and enabled their meeting. It was such an emotional reunion. And the father breathed his last the very next day!” recalls Simha.

There are no restrictions for the patients — no gloomy hospital gowns, no visiting hours; they can walk into the recreation zone any time and watch television; celebrate festivals and special occasions; and have their favourite food on demand. Time is the only factor in short supply.

“It is like being in a resort, and I forget I am a cancer patient, I am blessed to spend this valuable time of my life here.” These are the words of Ayesha, a patient, recorded in the register. She died three months later.

Educational initiatives

The Rotary Indiranagar-BHT Centre for Palliative Care Education offers training programmes in association with Cardiff University, UK. Support is also extended to satellite hospices set up at various cities across the country.

patients, providing them nursing care and counselling services. Soon, more teams were formed.

The foundation stone for Karunashraya was laid in 1996 on a 5-acre land leased by the Government. Soon the majestic stone building, “considered one of the best models of a green architecture,” was put up by eminent architects Chandavarkar & Thacker (for zero fee), and was ready in 1999.

Today the 55-bed hospice provides free palliative care through medical and psychological interventions.



“ It is like being in a resort, and I forget I am a cancer patient, I am blessed to spend this valuable time of my life here. ”

Resources

Financial support came from various quarters, “from ordinary citizens of Bengaluru to families of our patients. Special mention needs to be made of the House of Tatas. They have contributed more than Rs 20 lakh over the years,” says Simha.

On other helping hands, he recalls “the Matching Grant from RC Faringdon, RI District 1090, UK and TRF (\$156,000), that helped the purchase of hospice equipment. Another

one facilitated by PDG S Udaya Kumar helped to purchase a generator set and electrical fittings. Rtn Ben Bazely of RC Shrewsbury, District 1210, helped obtain a DDF grant, funding the travel of our nurses to Shrewsbury and London for training.”

Everything from furniture to beds and wheel chairs here has come through donations. “There was even a time when there was no rice in the kitchen and a donor sent 50 bags immediately,” says Archana.

A sister-hospice relationship forged with Severn Hospice, Shrewsbury and St Joseph’s Hospice, London provided further guidance. “Rtn Jeremy Johnson, Director of Severn Hospice and his wife Penny visit us every year, many times with a delegation, and spend a week teaching and guiding our staff,” says Simha.

The demand for beds at Karunashraya is so high that every day, at least three to four patients are turned away. Construction is now on to accommodate 24 more beds.

What you can do

As I take leave, I contribute Rs 1,000 into their collection-box. But this is too small a sum to compensate for their expansive activity.

Karunashraya welcomes volunteers and monetary contributions to expand its journey. Donations can be made through their website: www.karunashraya.org

Designed by N Krishnamurthy