



Profile

Viswanathan Mohan: a dynasty of diabetology



Diabetes runs in some families but it's the study and treatment of diabetes that runs in Viswanathan Mohan's. His father, Moopil Viswanathan, earned himself the title of India's 'father of diabetology.' In 1948, he established the country's first diabetes clinic in post-independence India at the Stanley Medical College, a government-run institute in Chennai (then known as Madras). "It's a mystery to me why he chose to do that," says Mohan. "There were only a few people with diabetes in the whole city."

Mohan didn't intend to follow in his father's footsteps. At school, he was passionate about English literature and hoped to become a writer. Moopil Viswanathan had other plans. He had by then left the government system and needed the help of his eldest son to set up India's first private diabetes hospital. Mohan reluctantly agreed on condition that he was allowed to do research. The hospital's rundown garage served as his first laboratory.

Research was Mohan's new passion, scientific writing his literary outlet. By the end of his medical education, he had published 32 papers, more than many of his teachers. His early start and abundant energy helps explain how Mohan became India's top-ranking medical researcher with over 1400 publications to his name.

For two decades, Mohan worked with his father, except for a couple of years in which he and his wife, Rema (a specialist in diabetic eye disorders), lived and studied in the UK and Germany. Long enough to learn from their overseas colleagues, short enough to retain their roots in India.

Back home, Mohan's ambitions outgrew his father's institution. In 1991, he and Rema struck out on

their own. "We left empty-handed with almost nothing in the bank," says Mohan. What the pair lacked in material resources, they made up for in expertise, organisational know-how, determination and luck. Renting a small building in south Chennai, they established Dr. Mohan's Diabetes Specialities Centre. Five years later, they relocated to their own purpose-built hospital. It remains the headquarters for Mohan's ever-expanding empire of diabetes clinics—50 of them are now scattered across 32 cities—several of which are charitable organisations providing free treatment for thousands of diabetic patients.

To train staff for their clinics, the couple ran courses. Eventually, they opened Dr. Mohan's Diabetes Education Academy, which has so far trained 12 500 physicians and over 400 specialists with diabetes.

Mohan's contribution to diabetes care in India is matched by his research achievements. In 1996, he and Rema turned a single room in their Chennai hospital into the Madras Diabetes Research Foundation. Today it sprawls across a 6.5 acre campus and is the largest standalone diabetes research facility in Asia.

With a research centre of his own, Mohan reset his agenda, shifting his focus from fibrocalculous pancreatic diabetes to type 2 diabetes, which rose alarmingly in the 1990s. According to Mohan, this was due to India's economic boom: "People were more prosperous, waists were expanding, diabetes was increasing." Initially, his research relied on case records from his clinic, but he quickly saw the need for population-based data. So he ran a small epidemiological study of two Chennai regions, then

a large one for the entire city. The Chennai Urban Rural Epidemiology Study was a great success, giving rise to 150 peer-reviewed papers and the Indian Diabetes Risk Score, a simple but very useful tool for assessing someone's risk of type 2 diabetes.

However, Mohan's daughter, Anjana, wasn't impressed. He recalls that, when she was just an undergraduate medical student, she said to him one evening: "Papa, you're studying Chennai and extrapolating to the whole of India. How can you do that? You need to think bigger, study the whole of India." Mohan had to agree, but balked at such a massive and complicated undertaking. So he asked her to shelve the idea until she'd finished her MBBS, and then her MD, all the while hoping that she'd forget about it. She didn't. In the end, with Mohan's backing and that of the Indian Council of Medical Research, Anjana led India's largest ever study of diabetes (ICMR-INDIAB). It has surveyed 124 000 people across all states, each of which she has visited to train staff and oversee research.

Mohan has collaborated on larger projects—such as the Centre for Cardiometabolic Risk Reduction in South Asia (CARRS) surveillance study and the Prospective Urban Rural Epidemiological (PURE) study—but he is especially proud of what his daughter achieved with ICMR-INDIAB. She has, he says, taken the family tradition to a new level. "My father, when he started, had nobody to guide him. Standing on his shoulders, I was able to see more than he could imagine. She's standing on my shoulders, so her vision is greater than mine."

Carl Power