

Bringing Back The Black Bag

The Humanism of Dr. Mukta Panda

By Mike Haskew

For Dr. Mukta Panda of Erlanger Health System, viewing a patient solely as a set of symptoms just won't cut it. A fierce advocate for humanism in medicine, she knows the physician-patient relationship is crucial for the highest quality treatment and the best patient outcomes.

"Humanism in medicine is taking care of the patient as a human being, not simply a disease entity or a name," Dr. Panda says. "We have a unique privilege in this profession to deal with the patient as a whole person. The moment that we introduce ourselves as Dr. So-and-So, the patient places trust in us and tells us issues that they may not share with anyone else."

Dr. Panda came to Chattanooga in 1994 after receiving her medical degree from Goa Medical College in India and completing an internship in obstetrics and gynecology at King's College in London.



She explains that her philosophy of patient care was instilled in her by her parents, both physicians and teachers. She remembers her first rotation as a young medical student following her mother during patient visits.

"I remember being in the rooms as she was teaching physicians. On one busy day, we had seen many patients who were very sick and all of us were tired. When we got to the last patient, I thought we would finish quickly. But mother and the senior resident with her sat down with the patient. They talked about life and family.

"Finally, the lady asked us who we were. Then, she said something very profound. She said, 'Doctors will always be respected and recognized, but not always remembered.' Then she looked at my mother and the resident and said, 'I will remember you because you took care of me and not just my heart failure.'"

Dr. Panda also recalls the compassionate approach of her father, a surgeon, as he instructed residents how to prepare for surgery.

"He began with how to scrub their hands, wear their gloves, and prepare the patient for the operation," Dr. Panda says. "Finally, he said to them, 'Before I touch the scalpel to the skin, I shut my eyes and say a silent prayer.' That really hit me. We talk and read about what to do as a physician and educator, but when we see human beings emulate and practice it, that's when we really learn."



When Dr. Panda first came to Chattanooga, she worked as an ultrasound technologist and completed a residency in internal medicine. Today, she holds a variety of leadership roles in Chattanooga's medical community: at UT College of Medicine—Chattanooga (UTCOM), she is chair of the Department of Medicine and director of the Transitional Year Program, and at Erlanger Health System, she is the physician service line leader for the hospital's medicine service line.

Through these roles, she has put into practice the lessons she learned early in her medical career and influenced numerous residents and physicians with her compassionate perspective on patient care. "We have the opportunity to train future doctors who will take care of you and me and our loved ones, to bring soul to the role of taking care of another person," she says. "We try to stress this early in training and it perpetuates itself."



Dr. Panda with medical residents from UTCOM



Dr. Panda with Dr. Arun Gandhi, socio-political activist and grandson of Mahatma Gandhi



Dr. Panda with her parents

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Dr. Panda poses with other 2012 Women of Distinction

diagnosis, but to hear and feel their suffering and be a part of it. Sometimes we are limited in what we can do even as doctors, and while we may not always have the ability to cure, we do have the ability to care.”

Bring Back the Black Bag is still an active program at UTCOM with residents making house calls on select patients. In addition to Dr. Rybolt, Dr. Panda credits strong partnerships with Erlanger Health System, the Arnold P. Gold Foundation, ContinuCare and the college itself for the program’s success.



In addition to her daily interaction with patients and physicians, Dr. Panda’s commitment to humanism in medicine has manifested itself through an initiative called “Bringing Back the Black Bag,” named with a nod to the house calls doctors made generations ago. Through Dr. Panda’s collaborative work with several partners, particularly Dr. Ann Rybolt, the program has achieved widespread recognition.

“The whole premise was that during their three years of training, we would expose residents to what it’s like to see patients in their own circumstances,” explains Dr. Panda. “It’s not just about assessing their physical condition, but also things like whether their home is safe and what resources might be needed beyond medications such as transportation or better nutrition.

“I feel that you can’t get a full sense of what the patient is going through and what the real issue may be until you see them in their own environment,” she continues. “Relating to patients on a personal level requires us to not just provide a disease

“Relating to patients on a personal level requires us to not just provide a disease diagnosis, but to hear and feel their suffering and be a part of it. Sometimes we are limited in what we can do even as doctors, but while we may not always have the ability to cure, we do have the ability to care.”

– Dr. Mukta Panda

Today, Dr. Panda is well-known nationally and internationally for her vision and perspective on patient care. She has been published many times, is highly sought after as a public speaker, and has received numerous awards including the 2012 Women of Distinction Award from the American Lung Association of Tennessee and the 2010 Hind Rattan Award given by the government of India.

Yet if you meet her, you’ll find she’s also very human (pun intended). When she’s not practicing medicine, Dr. Panda says she often entertains in her home, cooking traditional Indian cuisine like her specialty spicy chicken curry dish. She’s also an avid reader and enjoys “good fellowship, talking, and telling stories.” She takes great pride in her daughter, Natasha, who teaches in New York, has completed two master’s degrees, and will soon obtain a doctorate, and her son, Nikhil, who is in his third year of medical school at the University of Tennessee—Memphis.

Summarizing her professional career, Dr. Panda explains her approach is grounded in basic truths and beliefs. “I have a very strong faith and personally believe we are instruments to fulfill our purpose,” she says. “I define personal success as using my God-given talents to bring out the best in others. We have a wonderful team in the department of medicine. My colleagues are just outstanding and very committed. I feel energized. I continue to learn a lot and feel very grateful because I have been blessed with wonderful partnerships locally and regionally.”



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