

## Transcript of Rai Interview Part 6: Youth and Early Career

Gerald Marti: I was reminded recently. I was in New Jersey for this thesis defense and visited the Orange County VA Medical Center and talked about CLL. And I met a couple of residents or fellows, one of who is I believe coming to Mount Sinai in July to be a part of your CLL program. And she reminded me that you began your career as a pediatrician.

Kanti Rai: Yes.

Marti: Would you care to comment upon that?

Rai: Yes, yes, that is quite true. I'm impressed that this person you met in the VA Hospital knew about that. Yes, I always wanted to be a pediatrician. When I was growing up and as a child, I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to be a person taking care of children, particularly children in the villages of India there because I had seen when I went to visit my uncle who was for a while a doctor in the village of Jodhpur region where I was born. And I saw young babies and children really suffering from anemia and malnutrition, infections. And I said when I become a physician, I become a doctor, I'll come back here and take care of them. That was my ambition.

And that is why I came to America for my pediatric training and my idea was that I would get myself trained and go back to India and practice pediatrics in the villages near Jodhpur. So, I came here in 1957 as a resident in pediatrics at the hospital of the city of New York, a municipal hospital called the Lincoln Hospital, and had a great time: learning experience was great, taking care of children, getting to know the parents. This was a blue collar community, mostly African-Americans and some Hispanic in the South Bronx, and within a matter of a few weeks, your life as a pediatric resident, you are spending a good amount of time in the emergency room, meeting all the parents who bring their babies and getting to know each other on a first name basis.

And I'd learn a lot. And then for the second year after Lincoln Hospital, I was chosen to be the chief resident at North Shore Hospital, the hospital where I currently am, the larger hospital system, and it was there when I was doing my residency that I met Arthur Sawitsky, who had brought a child, a three year old child who had acute lymphoblastic leukemia. And that child really, the exposure and the responsibility of taking care of that little girl—oh my God, who I liked very much and felt responsible for—and who died six months later. This is in 1958, so 52 years ago. And that challenged me, and my mentor recognized how upset I was, how bothered I was by the leukemia, that he stimulated, he guided me.

He said that I should do a fellowship in hematology and then from there, which I did at Long Island Jewish Hospital, and from there he guided me to go into research. And that led me to Brookhaven National Laboratory in Long Island, and a great institution for hematology research, and I worked with Gene Cronkite. And in Cronkite's—by this time I had already passed pediatric boards so that I became a board-certified person and then I started research. And there I saw multiple myeloma, chronic myeloid leukemia, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, acute leukemia—and no children. And I became more and more involved in cell kinetics, bone marrow and peripheral blood of leukemia, because Cronkite was the leader in the field and it was fascinating to do the studies with tritiated thymidine infusion for labeling and in vivo labeling<sup>1</sup> by giving infusions to the patients.

And before you know it, I became an adult leukemia person, far away from treating children. I never went back to pediatrics. I regret it to some extent, but I also know that our professional careers are a matter of serendipity, who influences you during your training period, and what circumstances and what patients influence you, and that lights your career so that it's not necessary that whatever you have pre-judged that this is what you want to be, that you'll become. And I'm grateful where I am.

Marti: You've spoken about mentors a lot during this interview. I recall earlier in one of our discussions that your uncle who was a physician in India, I think he also influenced your concept of care, if you wanted to comment upon that.

Rai: Great degree. My uncle was really the original role model for me. And he was the younger brother of my father. The two of them had about two years age difference with my father being the older and the patriarch of the family. He had the authority. And my uncle was no less a person, but he remained as though he was yet another child of my father. So, he was more a friend than uncle or a father figure. And he was a wonderful doctor, very, very caring, great sense of humor and light manner. That is, nothing pompous, nothing stiff-shirt type of thing. He was accessible to everybody. He was always smiling, always helping. Anybody who needed any help—medical or non-medical—he was there to help.

And that was, you know, my father also was a very helpful person, but he was a stiff person. He was much more of a disciplinarian and we had love and warmth for my father but more fear. Whereas my uncle, love, and no fear, and friendship, and I could open and talk, and he

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Rai's clarification: by labeling proliferating cells

would do things which only uncles can do. And when he was posted—this is a government doctor profession—when he was posted in the village near our city, I went to visit with him. And it was really quite an experience. It was a hot desert area of Rajasthan, and every morning we'd wake up and there was a line of camels, two or three camels, with the camel driver sent by different families to fetch the doctor for a house call because somebody in the family was ill.<sup>2</sup>

So, once in a while, I would, you know, my uncle would go on top of a camel and ride, and after seeing the patient would come back. Once or twice—maybe more than that—I would say—I was like seven, eight years old—"could I come for a ride on the camel?" "Ok, you can come but you can't be a nuisance. You should stay with the camel while I go and see the patient, and then we'll come back. Behave, ok?" So, I behaved. But when my uncle went inside the house, inside the house somebody would find out that the doctor's son is outside near the camel so they would come and fetch me inside and treat me with a great degree of goodies and sweets.

So, he would come back<sup>3</sup>, and I was well behaved, so I said to myself, "hey, being a doctor is wonderful. You try to treat and help people and then your children are well treated with goodies, so nothing is wrong about that." So that and my uncle also influenced me a lot in many respects and discussion and the excitement of diagnosis and treatment.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Rai's note: My uncle had a routine that every morning before going to his clinic, he would make these house calls.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Rai's clarification: after seeing the patient