



Drs Gayatri Banerjee and Bharati Banerjee at the Asia Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology Congress in Beijing in September

Family's strong emphasis on education shaped lives of mother/daughter

Continuing its profiles on RANZCO Members, in this issue, RANZCO News talks to Sydney-based mother and daughter ophthalmologists, Dr Bharati Banerjee and Dr Gayatri Banerjee, currently the only mother and daughter Fellows of the College. They are profiled separately.

Dr Bharati Banerjee (Mother)

You have an intriguing background with what sounds like a far-from-typical family.

Yes. I was born and educated in northern India. I spent my childhood during the Indian Independence Movement and I come from a medical family of freedom fighters during the time of Gandhi. My family was very active politically and medically and became well-known during the tremendous struggle for Indian Independence, during the times of non-violent protest. Our home was always filled with interesting people, great discussions, and we were always encouraged to maintain a thirst for knowledge, to work on increasing our intellectual powers, and to do our best for others. There was a culture of education, equality, and debate.

That sounds like a good legacy?

It was, and particularly influential for me was my parents' motto: No family can be called 'educated' unless the females in the family are educated.

What made you choose the path of ophthalmology?

Since the age of three I wanted to be a doctor, nothing else. I was still in my early teens when my sister's vision was compromised with amblyopia, so I determined to be an ophthalmologist. At that time in India, it was unheard of for women to do ophthalmology, but my parents encouraged me.

Where did you do your training?

I did my Medical Degree in Patna Bihar, in one of India's oldest medical schools. After an arranged marriage we moved to London where my husband was studying. My daughter was born between my Part 1 and Part 2 ophthalmology exams. Medical retina was my field. There was something particularly about this field that fascinated me and, later on, I started to do a lot of work with diabetic eye disease. There is a real need and I found I had an aptitude for it.

Coming to Australia was another big move for you?

We moved to Australia in the early 1980s. We thought Australia was a good place of opportunity and we've never looked back. I worked at Sydney Eye Hospital and Westmead Hospital, then moved to be an associate in a group practice.

Australia was a different world to me; a very beautiful, fruitful world. It was hard at times but I love what I do and learnt a lot from my patients and my colleagues. I

received a lot of help from different ophthalmologists who were a tremendous help when I arrived in Australia; in particular Dr Graham Henry, Prof Frank Martin, and Dr Peter Hopkins.

After a remarkable life journey and the challenges that come with change, do you feel at home?

This is my third country, my third home. It was a struggle initially when we first arrived – when you have no family backup. But our daughter settled into school and then went on to medical school. She has been abroad a lot during her training, but she has always called Australia home, and we have a wonderful connection.

As for the future, I am still very much enjoying my work and looking after my patients.

It sounds like you had very wise parents. What motto would you pass to the next generation?

Nothing comes easy in life, you have to work for it...

Dr Gayatri Banerjee (Daughter)

Your Mum has told us a bit about her childhood. In what way has that influenced your path?

I look on Mum's background in many ways to have shaped my current attitudes, and created my values and influenced the way I see the world.

My family had a strong emphasis on education. My [maternal] grandfather was a quite a prominent freedom fighter and politician in India and he firmly believed in equality in education for women. That legacy filtered down to benefit me. And while it's not so extraordinary for my generation, it was an extraordinary thing for females of my mum's generation to accomplish what she's done. That's a powerful source of my inspiration.

Your father was also an inspiration to you.

Yes, my father was a surgeon and a GP. He loved communicating with people and was universally liked and respected, because he genuinely cared about those around him. One example was when I had to do house calls for some of his older patients when I was doing a locum for him. House calls are almost unheard of these days, but it helped to build my attitude towards patients, and the way I relate to their concerns. It is the little

things that count. I look back with pride at what my family instilled in me, and also much humility because I realise what tremendous challenges they faced.

Do people assume you've had an easy journey because your parents were doctors?

I think there can be the assumption that if your mother is an ophthalmologist you'll have an easier path. But it's certainly been challenging at times and I've had to prove myself over and over. I've actually done a double Fellowship: I went to Houston Texas, Oxford & Moorfields Eye Hospital London and did my FRCOphth there, and then I came back and did further training and FRANZCO here at Prince of Wales Hospital before returning to Moorfields to do my sub-specialty Fellowship in Retina. I have just opened a subspecialty practice at Nepean Valley Eye Surgeons, in Western Sydney.

Did your mum ever encourage you to do something other than medicine or ophthalmology?

No, not really. I have always wanted to do medicine, and ophthalmology in particular – it's something I really have a passion for. Mum is inspirational – she taught me about respect and courage. She also gives me a great historical perspective of the way ophthalmology was and the way it's going to become, and it helps to know how you slot into the scheme of things. I believe it does take a community to make an ophthalmologist, and that includes my patients, family, friends and teachers, and I am very grateful for the support and wisdom of my colleagues.

What do you do when you're not working?

I am very keen about the charity work I've been involved with for the Fred Hollows Foundation in Cambodia. I've just returned from my second visit there and was heartened to see that out of three trainees this year, they took on two girls. It's great they have female role models going to Cambodia and working with them, and the girls are doing fantastically well.

In a way it sounds like you're carrying on your grandparents' motto about female education. Mottoes seem to run in the family, what is yours?

One of my favourite sayings is by US President Barack Obama's "Yes we can".