

# Looking At Life Beyond Work

*Dream Bigger And Achieve Bigger*



## **Dr.G.Balamurali**

MBBS, MRCS (Ed), MD (UK),FRCS (Surgical Neurology),  
Consultant Spine and Neurosurgeon, Chennai.

### **A Neurosurgeon- A Dream And A Passion For A Lifetime**

Born to teachers, Dr.Balamurali was a highly motivated kid right from childhood days. He always aimed to become a doctor and strived for it. Being an all-rounder at Montfort School, Yercaud he studied hard and completed medicine with distinction. Later, two months after completing his internship from Kilpauk Medical College, on a cold winter night he landed in

London with eyes full of dreams and hopes! He always carried a positive attitude and looked forward to a bright future. He didn't think much about how, when and where he would achieve it. With high hopes, aspirations and dreams to be a surgeon, he worked hard, pushed himself out of his comfort zones and completed his training as a general surgeon from the Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh. Soon, he completed his MRCS and began walking closer and closer towards his dreams.

## **From Frustrations To Achievements**

To become a Neurosurgeon in the 90s was next to impossible for the minority race! But, that didn't stop him from dreaming and working hard towards his goal. Still, the path ahead was not as smooth as he had expected. Having failed 8 interviews with a decent CV and many publications to his credit, he started getting frustrated that he was unable to achieve his dream- to be a Neurosurgeon! But that didn't deter him. He decided to take an alternative route and opted to do research at Cambridge University. Soon, he bagged the Research MD with groundbreaking results and published his monogram. This was indeed a turning point that won him several awards and recognitions.

But, the journey was never an easy one. This sudden shift to research was also the toughest period for him, both personally and professionally. Yet, he learned the biggest lesson he had ever learnt- to think beyond the routines and to refuse to accept failure! In midst of all this, he had got married and his newlywed wife, Dr Vennila stood strong beside him as a pillar of support during all these turbulent three years of unpaid research.

From then on there was no looking back! Interviews flowed towards his way from every university he had applied and suddenly everyone started to realise the potential of this young man! He now started his professional life to be trained as a Neurosurgeon from Manchester, Hope Hospital and The Walton Centre, Liverpool.

## **Sharpening The Skills, Gaining The Accolades**

The 6 long years of training set a strong base to his future career and he had by then published and presented various topics worldwide. He further sub-specialised into becoming a spine expert and in 2006, he was one among the very few from all over the world to grab a travel award from the American Association of Neurological Surgeons. He thus got the opportunity to spend long 2 years in Chicago and San Francisco doing clinical fellowships in Minimally invasive spine surgery. Following that, he went on to complete a complex spine fellowship at Zurich, Switzerland with the pioneers in the field.

He was the most favoured candidate when he applied for a consultant job at the Queens Medical Centre, Nottingham. Thus, he kick-started his career as a consultant spine surgeon in

Europe's most popular and largest Spine Department. The department had 15 spine surgeons with Dr Balamurali being the youngest and the only other neurosurgeon doing full-time spine surgery.

## **Breaking The Monotony, Achieving "Life Beyond Work"**

The recession took a big toll throughout the West in 2008. Dr Balamurali, working as a consultant suddenly started feeling that life had become too settled, too comfortable and almost came to a standstill with a monotonous lifestyle. He had been living in the UK for the past 14 years and also had a happy family with 2 daughters Mekala and Nithila. But, yet something was missing! He now started searching for a "LIFE BEYOND WORK".

During that time, he was invited to Ganga hospital, Coimbatore as a visiting faculty for one week. Until that point of time, he had no intention to return back to India and he had never interacted with or operated any patients in India. But, after spending 2 weeks in India operating and interacting with people over here he got very intrigued. He was concerned about the fact that the quality and quantity of work performed here had not undergone much changes from the time he had left India years back.

## **A Decision To Go Back To His Roots**

He immediately called up his wife who was working as a Consultant anaesthetist in Liverpool and blurted out " Shall we move to India? I believe we can make a difference in our country with our expertise! We can also stay close to our roots for the sake of our parents and for our kids' future." The casual conversation took a sudden turn and to his immense joy and surprise, she didn't wait even for a moment to say " Yes! Let's go! "

Within 6 months they resigned from their jobs in the UK, sold both their houses and got a one-way ticket back to India, back to their roots! They now had a bigger agenda- to create something new out of nothing and to start from scratch all over again. Ignoring the hot weather, the congested traffic, the corruption and low Indian mindsets, they decided to settle in Coimbatore.

It was indeed a million-dollar question when all around him- friends, family and relatives asked the same question- Why this sudden decision? Why move back to India? He had only 2 answers - He had a feeling in his mind that it was time to return home as he had already experienced and enjoyed the best of the best in life. Secondly, he wanted to be one among those people he had grown up with and wanted to make a difference to his home- his country which needed him the most now!

## **Realizing That Life Comes With A Price Tag!**

After a few months, he was appalled and heartbroken to realise that not much had changed in India even after these long 15 years. Apart from the fact that the healthcare system had become more privatized and had more facilities than the UK, the training, the patient care and the need gap basis of the healthcare service system was still insufficient. A few incidents that happened after he shifted to India further changed his perspective of what to do next while staying in India. He realized the hard truth that “ Life in India came with a Price Tag!” Even if you are fortunate enough to be one among the affluent class, still quality healthcare was not guaranteed. The healthcare in India was a numbers game and the only thing that mattered was how much you can make!

## **Eye Opener Experiences**

One incident that was a real eye-opener for him was when the wife of a paraplegic person with spinal cord injury fell on his feet and begged him not to save her husband’s life. He had repeated complications in his health and she couldn't take it anymore. She begged him with folded hands and tear-stained face that she had drained all their resources, and put their children’s education and future at stake. There is nothing else left with her and so it is better to let him die and not suffer any more! It was a moment that shocked him out of his wits and made him take a decision to fight the challenges in our society

He became a Rotarian and that gave him a huge networking opportunity to interact with likeminded people who believed in making a change in the society. He applied for a global grant through his contacts abroad for 60 lakh rupees and started providing free rehabilitation facilities to patients with spinal cord injuries at Ganga hospital, Coimbatore. Thus, he started making a difference in the lives of 45 patients in a year.

This project named RASTRA (Rotary Aid for Spinal Treatment and Rehabilitation) was soon recognized as the best project in the Rotary District for 4 years. Dr G. Balamurali was awarded by our former president of India, late Dr A P J Abdul Kalam through his “Lead India 2020” organization just 6 months before he breathed his last. Dr Balamurali was indeed very privileged to have got the opportunity to spend several hours with this great man and hold those moments close to his heart as one of the best moments ever in his life.

## **Embarking On A New Journey With Kauvery Hospital**

Even without any contacts, referral doctors or patient backup in Chennai, he was very pleased to find a haven at Kauvery Hospital. Dr Aravindan and Dr Chandrakumar trusted in his capabilities and welcomed him to create a world-class Spine Department in Chennai and that is

becoming a truth today! He is ever thankful to them for trusting him and entrusting him with such a prestigious project.

In the beginning days, he didn't have much work to do as there were very few patients to be operated on. He started getting bored and hence accepted an offer to write a book and completed 6 book chapters within 1 year. But, slowly things started falling in place and he started getting busy with his works. That is when he felt a strong need for restructuring higher surgical training.

This thought grew to be an idea and resulted in the inception of a company named Royal Academy for Clinical and Surgical excellence (RASCE) and [International spine academy](#) (iSpine). The academy is in charge of various specialized courses for spine surgeons based in India and the UK. The Spine Boot Camp was a new concept and it has now gained huge popularity among spine surgeons nationally and always had a long waiting list of attendees. Within the last 3 years, the Academy has produced several courses for doctors in soft skills, and presentation skills through live surgeries and seminars. It has also witnessed a major conference with delegates from all over the world. The Academy aims to offer quality education to spine surgeons on various aspects of spine surgery, planning and treatment. Today, it stands tall as an online university of knowledge

### **A Neurosurgeon, Trainer And Co-Editor**

Today, he is involved in the training of more than 200 plus spine surgeons and is also the co-editor of a Journal of Spine Surgery. He is also the Executive Committee member of Minimally Invasive Spine Surgeon of India, and a teaching faculty in all National Spine Societies. He holds a coveted position as a board member in several international spine societies. He has lectured and presented research papers world-wide in more than 400 conferences. He has 14 book chapters, 100 plus publications in journals and other health care articles to his credit and has performed over 30 live surgeries in India and abroad.

### **Social Justice- A Commitment To The Society**

Recently, an incident tugged his heartstrings so much that it led to the creation of yet another project. A newborn baby with a large spinal cord tumour was operated successfully and the news was published in the media. He then received a call from the head of Neonatology at IOG (Institute of Obstetrics and Gynecology), Chennai asking him whether he can collaborate with the government in treating babies born with congenital spinal dysraphism. He readily agreed to it and with the gracious support of Dr Aravindan, successfully operated a handful of newborn babies with congenital defects. All these operations were done with very minimal money through the government scheme and with a huge subsidy from the Kauvery hospital CSR funds.

The most challenging aspect of these surgeries was that most of these babies were born with low birth weight, and hence it required immense care to avoid complications. He spoke about this extensively to his circle of Rotary friends and convinced them to begin a project to sustain the cause as it was becoming difficult for Kauvery hospital to take it up as a long term project. After a lot of lobbying in the US and Sri Lanka Rotary clubs, he was very pleased to get a huge grant of 75 lakhs to treat these babies. Currently, the program called “Thuli” a joint project between the Rotary Club of Madras North and Kauvery Hospital has performed more than 45 surgeries successfully. He was congratulated for his social commitment and efforts not only by the management but also by his entire team of doctors and anaesthetists. The entire team does an amazing job under very subsidized costs to save these babies who might otherwise have to succumb to death due to lack of operation facilities. He is always grateful to all the members of his Rotary club without whom this could not have been possible.

### **There Is A Moon For Even The Darkest Night**

He has always thankfully remembered that in these 7 years after his return to India, despite being a country that has a huge number of people living in severe poverty and ignorance; India is still blessed with an equal number of people with generous pockets and good hearts. He believes that such public and private partnerships can be a bigger solution to the health care deficiencies faced by India today. The government must look into this more seriously and identify those areas of health care that can be uplifted through similar concrete partnerships.

### **Serial Entrepreneur- Say YES To Opportunities**

He believes that a lot of these accomplishments were only possible by keeping an open mind and being a “YES MAN” to any opportunity that comes his way. Instead of getting belittled by the difficult situations in his professional life, he considered it as an opportunity to improve himself by choosing the path of retrospection and perseverance. He believes that unless you are challenged and unless you fail, you will never succeed. Though he feels that he has accomplished many things, still there are twice many things he has failed to achieve. But, he has accepted it gracefully and decided to move on in life taking each failure as a valuable lesson.

### **Challenging Himself To Reach Out To The Mountains**

Being a fitness enthusiast he took to trekking in 2013 to challenge himself and attain more fitness. Though he was never a trekker before, for the first time ever he decided to climb Mt Everest Base camp. He trained vigorously for 6 months and completed the climb with a group of friends in 8 days. And, that day he realized that the most breathtaking view ever in this world is the beauty of the towering mountains and lush green nature.

Since Mt. Everest expedition, he had a strong notion that the mountains keep calling him every moment to explore nature, climb higher and soak in the most awe inspiring view ever! So, he continued his trekking journey and went on to climb several tall peaks in Asia including the tallest in Southeast Asia- Mt Kinabalu in Indonesia. Currently, he is planning another trip to the Himalayas. He believes that this is the best way to recharge his mind, body and thoughts. He has also observed that this time spent with the mountains has helped him immensely to increase his productivity levels. The mountains keep reminding you that you are so small and non significant in this universe of wonders. It makes you more humble and helps you to stay grounded. It reminds you about that fact that you can't conquer the world, be it in your profession or in your ambitions. We need to maintain a perfect harmony and stay humble.

During and after returning from his first trip to Everest he designed a weight loss program along with his fellow trekker friend and wrote a book to start a program named GETFITNESS (Group Empowerment Therapy for Fitness). It is all set to be launched shortly through [www.getfitness.co.in](http://www.getfitness.co.in).

## **Extending A Helping Hand To The Distressed**

When he was planning to start his next expedition to the Himalayas, he was stranded by the 2015 Chennai floods. Having cancelled his operations and clinic and with no patients coming to the hospital, this was yet another good opportunity knocking on the doors! He joined a small group of likeminded people and started taking part in the relief work and found that there was a desperate need for medical care. On the 3rd day when Chembambakkam dam was opened and the city started getting more flooded, things started to worsen more. On the very same day, when he sat with his close friend in Coimbatore who was also a very tech savvy person, he felt that there was a need for doctors to join together to help the community. Even though the online connectivity was limited, they started looking for help outside the state and formed a social media group called DOCTORNET and requested for help. Surprisingly, it got a wide reach and more than 100 doctors came forward on the first day itself and agreed to join the cause.

The next task was to arrange for the essential medicines, vehicles and other financial aid. For that, he approached a social group and put forward his request. Within 24 hours he had a huge workforce with 200 plus people willing to work for the cause. The Tata disaster relief group approached him and they also brought doctors from all over India along with a flight full of medicines.

The next 10 days were busy days indeed! His unexpected leave without much work to do was suddenly converted to hectic days in which he strolled around the slums of Chennai and the surrounding areas to provide help and medical assistance to around 10000 people. Several pharmacies, NGOs and likeminded people joined him in his mission and achieved what they had aimed to do. At the end of this fruitful mission, they hosted a celebration party with almost 500 volunteers who had worked day and night to help people in distress. Again, a huge thanks

to Kauvery Hospital who played a key role in providing medical facilities and nursing staff to carry out the project.

On the 1st anniversary of the Chennai floods, he was given the “HEROES OF CHENNAI” award by Hindu at a public event. The DoctorNet Company was later registered and his friend Mr Aravind converted it into an NGO. This NGO has till date helped more than 500 patients in 5 years by providing telemedicine services in the rural Tamil Nadu.

The telemedicine technology using smartphones was tested during the Chennai flood and it was further developed by his team. He strongly believes that the choices we make will always have consequences attached to it. That is how he works and he doesn't think beyond a point about his personal gains in every action he takes. He is on the board of several NGOs working mainly for helping people with disability and healthcare needs.

### **Operation Theatre- His Holy Temple**

If we ask him what he likes the most among all the things he does, he will reply without even thinking twice that it is the time spent doing operations with soothing music in the background and also the time spent interacting with his patients. The place he likes most is his operation theatre as he considers that as his temple. His mission in life, his likes, and everything else is only secondary.

Most of the time he performs minimally invasive spine surgeries and complex procedures. One of the technically challenging surgeries he performs exceptionally well is the surgery for pain caused by brachial plexus injury and spinal cord injury. He says that it is the most satisfying operation he ever does. It is because these are patients who are suffering from the most excruciating pain ever in their entire lifetime. They endure so much pain that most of them will end up attempting suicide unable to bear the pain. He has come across such patients who have never left home for 5 years or even more. He wanted to put an end to their pain and started doing this operation as there was no one else willing to do it!

In the meantime, he also trained and visited a few centres abroad and learnt to perform this surgery better. He introduced a few modifications also in it. Currently only a few surgeons in the country perform this operation and he has now done more than 30 operations. He always looks forward to seeing these patients the next day after surgery and to see the relief and happiness on their faces. He believes that nothing is more satisfying than relieving someone from the most painful suffering they had ever endured. He thanks God for giving him this opportunity to give a new lease of life to these people. Recently, a nationwide patient support group was launched from Kauvery hospital for these patients by the name [www.bpisupportgroup.com](http://www.bpisupportgroup.com).

## **Balancing The Life Equation With Hobbies**

He strongly believes that unless you destress and have a diversion outside your busy work schedule, the life equation will not be balanced. Hence, to diffuse this complex relationship he spends time to explore various art forms, listen to music or play music. He learned art and at every point when there is an opportunity to put his head down he indulges in art and he gets so engrossed in it that a whole Sunday is spent in working on artistic expressions! This helps him to relax and stay composed and concentrate more on his work from the next day.

He took a liking to pencil art and portraits and has also done an art exhibition. He learnt to play the guitar but is still fine tuning his skills at home making his kids go bonkers! He plans to form a band with his kids someday for family parties; “Only if they can match my skills!” He replies with a wink and a chuckle! He prefers to spend quality time in peaceful surroundings and loves to watch movies with his family. He always credits his success and accomplishments to his calm and accommodating wife Dr Vennila, kids and also to his parents who had adjusted so much as he was not around for them at many instances. However he also tries to spend quality time with them by disappearing along with them to some place outside the country taking short or long breaks with strictly no mobile phone or internet access.

## **A Wish - A Dream For The Future**

It is true that people like him will often have a huge wishlist but right now he only has one dream- To set up a Spine and Brain rehab centre in Chennai in collaboration with Kauvery Hospital. This dream is in the process of setting up right now. This rehabilitation centre will be the first of its kind in this region with research methods and evidence based practices used to provide high quality care at affordable cost. The center is due to start in May and will cater to 20 in-patients, out-patients and daycare patients. The centre will be called HAMSA, with a mythological meaning of good luck, health and prosperity ([www.hamsarehab.com](http://www.hamsarehab.com)).