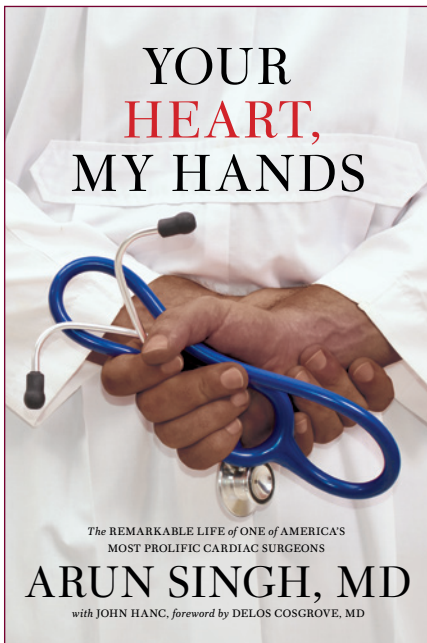


Your Heart, My Hands:

Cardiac surgeon Arun Singh's memoir an engrossing immigrant saga of struggles, successes – in life and in the OR

KENNETH S. KORR, MD, FACC
RIMJ ASSOCIATE EDITOR

I was driven, first and foremost, to save the lives of my patients. But I also wanted desperately to succeed; to show that I was not the indolent wastrel, the failure that many, most notably my father, had predicted. Indeed, the fear of failure was a presence in my OR almost as palpable as the feel of the scalpel in my hand.



Your Heart, My Hands, published by the Hachette Book Group, will be available April 16, 2019 in multiple formats, including hardcover and ebooks. yourheartmyhands.com

So begins the remarkable story of notable Rhode Island cardiothoracic surgeon Dr. Arun Singh. It is perhaps many stories, a tale of overcoming physical and learning disabilities, the quintessential immigrant's saga of struggle for success in America, and ultimately a love story – the tough love of a mother for her son, the love and support of a wife for her husband and the love of a physician for his craft and for his patients.

Arun was born in 1944, in Deoghar, in northeast India, during the tumultuous era leading up to the partition of Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. He was a curious and rambunctious youth whose “most notable childhood talents included a penchant for hopping trains, flying kites and generally getting into mischief.”

He suffered two separate, crippling hand injuries in childhood in rural India, where there was only rudimentary health care and where he had to rely on a regimen of physical therapy, improvised by a dedicated mother with no education and no rehab training but with a great deal of common sense.

He was profoundly influenced by his maternal grandfather, a successful ENT surgeon who encouraged Arun to pursue medicine, not just for the material rewards, but out of a sense of obligation. “Your doctors helped you when you were a kid, Arun,” he said, during one of my visits. “Now maybe you’ll become a doctor and help other kids.”

Then there was his learning disability. Dyslexia wasn’t recognized as such at the time and like most who suffered from it, it was assumed he couldn’t read or write well, because he didn’t care to or because he was lazy or stupid. It forced



BRIEF BIO

Arun Singh, MD

Clinical Professor Emeritus of Surgery,
The Warren Alpert Medical School
of Brown University

Recent Honors

Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame,
inducted in 2017

Inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award:
Lifespan/Rhode Island Hospital, 2014

Education

Darbhanga Medical School,
Bihar University, Bihar, India
MBBS, with honors, 1967

Postgraduate Training

Worcester City Hospital,
Worcester, MA
Surgical Internship, 1967–1968

Harlem Hospital, Francis Delafield,
Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center,
New York City (Columbia University
College of Physicians & Surgeons
Affiliated Hospitals)
Surgical Residency, 1968–1972

Rhode Island Hospital
Thoracic & Cardiovascular Residency,
1972–1974

Hospital for Sick Children,
London, England
Pediatric Cardiac Surgery
Senior Registrar in
Thoracic & Cardiovascular Surgery,
1974–1975



him to work twice as hard and to develop intricate workarounds, code words and acronyms in order to master the imposing body of knowledge required of a medical student. Ultimately, he would graduate at the top of his medical school class.

During his final year at Darbhanga Medical School he was encouraged to pursue further training in America by one of his professors, a cardiologist who had trained in Chicago. "Night and day," is what he'd say about the Chicago hospitals in which he'd done his clinical rotations, compared to the grim institution we worked in. "You'd be amazed at the stuff the Americans have." He was also influenced by two books given to him by his grandfather, a biography of the Mayo brothers and a book about Dr. William Halsted that he read over and over. In the memoir, he relates that Halsted did nothing less than invent modern surgery, particularly through his advocacy of sterilization as a way to stop infection and reduce mortality rates, a then-new theory that many American surgeons refused to accept at the time. Halsted later became chief of surgery at Johns Hopkins where he influenced and educated the 20th century's first-generation of surgeons

In 1967, Arun began his immigrant journey to America in pursuit of his goal to become an orthopedic surgeon. He accepted a surgical internship at Worcester City Hospital in Massachusetts including room and board and the princely sum of \$5000 in salary. He arrived with \$5.00 and a pocketful of

dreams. Unlike the great university hospitals of America or Great Britain, Worcester City Hospital wasn't a place where the next generation of surgeons came for their training. The residents were simply a form of cheap labor, he writes, and ultimately, without any other real prospects, he turned down a guaranteed four-year surgical residency.

Next stop, Columbia University in New York, where a shortage of residents due to U.S. physicians enlisting in the Vietnam War allowed him to secure a coveted surgical residency. Living in New York City and training at Columbia were life-changing experiences for young Dr. Singh. He was exposed to some of the greatest surgeons and the newest and most innovative surgical techniques of the time. He practiced his suturing at home, late into the night, to overcome the limitations from his childhood injuries. Realizing that he did not have the upper-arm strength to be an orthopedic surgeon, he became enthralled with the emerging field of cardiac surgery and felt that this was his true calling.

In his few spare moments, he enjoyed the excitement of a vibrant metropolis. He met a young nurse with "pretty brown eyes and long brown hair," who became his guide and ultimately his wife and soulmate. And, he experienced the subtle racism of being a brown man in America. In the men's room at a black tie holiday hospital event he courteously handed a towel to an older surgeon, only to receive a generous tip in exchange.

The next hurdle in his career was to find a cardiac surgical fellowship, in a field where there were only 100 very competitive slots nationwide. Through the efforts of Dr. Kenneth Forde, an African Caribbean surgeon and residency director at Columbia, he was introduced to Dr. Karl Karlson at Rhode Island Hospital (RIH) and in July 1972 he was accepted into a new two-year cardio-thoracic surgical residency at RIH and Brown University.

In Rhode Island, he was exposed to the intricacies of pediatric cardiac surgery but still kept up his nightly suturing practice. Following this residency he went to London for a year, to the Hospital for Sick Children on Great Ormond Street, for more advanced training in pediatric cardiac surgical techniques. Along the way he and wife Barbara had two sons and he passed his cardio-thoracic surgical board exam.

Returning to America in 1975 he passed up an opportunity at Harvard and came back to work at RIH to start up a new program in pediatric cardiac surgery, but with privileges only to operate on children under two years of age, so as not to compete with other surgeons. He received strong community support from benefactors who wanted a viable pediatric cardiac surgical program in Rhode Island, so patients wouldn't have to go to Boston for care. But when the program lost his salary support he was out of a job. As a compromise he was given full cardiac surgical privileges to operate on all patients, but no salary. He was on his own!

During his long and illustrious career, Dr. Singh has performed more than 15,000 open-heart surgical procedures. He poignantly recalls those that have stood out most in his memory, usually where things did not go as planned. He shares the anxiety and soul searching of losing a patient and the compassion, humility and respect that he developed for his brave patients and their families. "I don't just work on hearts, I have one, too," he writes. Along the way his cases illustrate the personal and societal challenges related to drug addiction, the AIDs epidemic and the "great national shame of the lack of a cost-effective health care system."

His is a compelling story and a great read, especially for those of us in Rhode Island who have known and worked with him. ❖

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