

Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt of a diary entry written by Farhat Moazam, M.D., Ph.D., in December 1985. She and Richard Gross, M.D., had worked together in Florida. They met up again in Pakistan where she was leading the surgery department in the new Aga Khan University Hospital. "I had forgotten the effort it took to get our first orthopedic case done," she noted in a handwritten note to Dr. Jack Bryant several years later. "Meanwhile at AKUH we are now routinely doing state of the art orthopedics including joint replacements."

She refers to Gross throughout the piece as "Dick."

Syed lives in a small village somewhere in Chitral. He thinks he is 14 or 15 years old. His left femur is 15 cms shorter than his right. He has 5 sisters, who for social and cultural reasons cannot help the father till his small piece of land. Jack Bryant, Chairman of Community Health Sciences, on one of his visits to the peripheral clinics in Chitral, 5 months ago, first examined the youngster. He then circulated the slides of this smiling ruddy cheeked youngster, standing in the hills of Chitral, leaning on a wooden staff, one foot several inches off the floor. He is so disabled we must help him somehow, Jack said to me, when I first arrived from the States 4 weeks ago.

Two weeks ago, I learned that Dick Gross was passing through Karachi on his way to Peshawar for two weeks of volunteer orthopedic surgery for the Afghan refugees. Dick is a paediatric orthopedist at the University of Florida. Operation "Fix Syed's Leg" was put into motion and the orchestration began.

I picked up Dick at the Airport showed him the slides and asked if he would see the child if we could get him to Dick's hotel in Peshawar. Sure, he said, happy to do so, as he flew off to Peshawar. A cable was sent the same day to the Aga Khan office in Chitral. ...stressing that the child be sent to Peshawar, a 12 hours ride by Jeep, immediately. Famous American Surgeon here. Must see Syed right away, it said.

Two days later, on November 25, I received a phone call from a bemused Dick in Peshawar. A man just dropped off a boy in my hotel room. The man is gone and the boy speaks no English, Dick said. My communication with him so far is to feed him bananas. He likes bananas, Dick added. As the boy had a short left femur Dick and I concurred that he must be Syed.

Dick called me the next day and said that he had managed to see the boy's x-rays. Syed probably has Ollier's Disease plus an over-riding old fracture of the distal femur. Syed needs an osteotomy to straighten his femur, said Dick.

I thought rapidly. The hospital was only 4 weeks old. We had basic instruments but had not yet embarked on orthopedic cases. Give me a list of the instruments you will need and the size of the plate to fix his bone, I asked Dick. I called the supervisor of the OR as soon as Dick hung up. Can you get this stuff? An hour later he called back - I think we can do it.

The Community Medicine doctors were now mobilized - get the kid to Karachi somehow, they were told. Dick would pass through Karachi on November 30 for a few hours, on his way back to the States that night at 2 a.m. After initial panic and some deliberations about how all this would be financed it was decided to bring Syed down by train on November 26. Too long, we said. This was changed to a flight down on November 28.

On November 27, Dick called again from Peshawar. You know this kid is still in my hotel room. We are now communicating in sign language, he said, but what on earth am I supposed to do with him. Don't worry, I said, feed him more bananas, and we will get him down to Karachi, somehow.

A little later that day, with a sinking heart, I suddenly realized that we had no operative permit. With Syed's father in a remote telephoneless village in Chitral, at least two hours away by Jeep ride from the Aga Khan office, visions of Syed sitting in our hospital, permitless as Dick winged his way back to the USA floated through my mind. David Albala from CHS was contacted frantically. Can you help, I asked. Look, I know a tailor in Karachi who knows someone reliable in the Dreamland Hotel in Chitral, David offered. A call was made to Chitral. The tailor tells his friend, you must find Syed's father and get him to Dreamland Hotel so we can get a phone permit for surgery. It is urgent he says. It was now late November 27. Tomorrow afternoon, I am told, we will have the father in Dreamland. Inshallah.

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Meanwhile....Syed completes the very first airplane trip of his life, arriving at the Karachi airport. I meet him in the AKUH clinic. He smiles and shakes my hand in both of his. I was playing and fell 6 years ago, he says. I became

unconscious and they carried me home and put me to bed. I lay there for two months, and then I was well, but my leg became like this. He points to his leg. I notice that he has a marked shortening and an obvious deformity of his left femur. He has an adduction rotation at his knee and a tibial deformity above the ankle – perhaps representing another old fracture. His x-rays show the long bones of his left leg to be riddled with enchondromas at the metaphysis.

At 9:45 p.m. on November 28, after an hour of waiting, I finally get through to Dreamland again. To my relief the father is there but he speaks no Urdu. I speak to him through an interpreter. Every time I begin to explain the risks and details of surgery, he interrupts with profuse expressions of his gratitude, and statements to the effect that he has no questions and that he will pray for us. After his third declaration of faith in us, I decide I can construe this as permission for us to proceed with the surgery.

At noon on November 30, Dick is picked up from the Karachi Airport. In actuality it is my cousin who has been recruited to do the job as the hospital driver cannot be trusted to recognize Dick and we are working on a tight schedule. Syed is crying as he is rolled into the OR at 2 p.m. His smiles and bravado have evaporated and he is just a frightened little boy.

Dick arrives in the OR and we make the incision around 3 p.m. with David Albala clicking away on his camera. We perform the osteotomy, burr the holes and place the plate against the femur. It suddenly dawns on Dick that Syed's femur is so abnormally wide that the screws are not long enough to engage both cortices of the bone.

And these are the only screws we have. We are both stunned. After a moment of silence I ask the OR supervisor to call somebody in Purchasing Department about additional screws. He rushes out. We wait. Can you wait for 20 minutes, he says upon return. We have found the supplier's son who will open his shop on Bunder Road and try and get us the screws. Dick and I look at each other. We have no choice as it is late Saturday and all shops are now closed. Go right away, I say.

We let the tourniquet down on the leg and wait, covering the exposed bones and muscles with a sterile towel. Dick regales us with awful stories of the

injuries sustained by the Afghan refugees. After the longest 60 minutes of my life, the screws arrive. Another 15 minutes for sterilization and we are in business again. We finish the plating rapidly and then fuse the epiphyseal plate of the right femur to ensure it does not outgrow the effected leg. A long leg cast is placed on the left leg.

It is now 6:45 p.m. Dick has spent two busy weeks and is scheduled to fly off in the next 6 hours. He looks exhausted. He decides to accompany me to a dinner, scheduled that night, to welcome me to Pakistan as Chairman of the Department of Surgery. He is driven to his hotel to pick up his glasses and to have a quick wash. I check Syed in the recovery room and write a note in his chart before driving off to pick up Dick from his hotel.

At 8:30 p.m., Dick and I drive into the Boat Club. We walk in and face a group of people, the women dressed in saris and bedecked with jewelry, the men in coats and ties. I look at Dick. He has two weeks worth of a grizzled beard on his chin, dirty sneakers and a rumpled shirt open at the collar. He looks at me and I know he sees a slightly disheveled individual in wrinkled clothes donned early that morning.

I say to him, looks like you and I are a little underdressed. He says, yeah, this looks like a classy joint. We decide to go in anyway. Dick leaves soon after, before dinner is served, as he still has to pack before catching his flight.

Later that night, dinner over, I walk out to my car. The brown paper bag that had my lunch lies empty on the back seat of my car. Across it is scrawled - I ate your lunch. Thanks. Dick.