



# **THE CHANGE-MAKER**

DR HEMA DIVAKAR

*W*hen I was a young student, it was a given, “ladki hai toh doctor, ladka hai toh engineer” (girls will grow up to be doctors and boys, engineers),’ smiles the multiple award-winning Dr Hema Divakar, who also comes from a family of doctors, including her grandfather and a couple of uncles and aunts. ‘I would tag along with my grandfather, hang around his clinic, observe what he did. So when the time came, it all fell very naturally into place and I just went with the flow.’ Dr Hema, who was born and brought up in Mumbai, studied medicine at Seth Gordhandas Sunderdas Medical College (GSMC), Mumbai. ‘I loved surgery and was fascinated by the surgical challenges being an ob-gyn would offer,’ she says. Contrary to her image *circa* 2021, women’s health or empowerment had very little to do with her choice of specialization.

‘It was all about the temptation of wielding a knife,’ she admits. Dr Hema completed her MD in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1989 from Wadia Maternity Hospital in Mumbai.

Her marriage brought Dr Hema to Bangalore, where she set up Divakar’s Speciality Hospital in 1990. ‘I wanted to do things my own way, which is why I started my own hospital,’ she says. ‘Even though I was brought up in Mumbai, my mother tongue is Kannada, which I am fluent in, so my patients feel comfortable with me.’ Her conversations with her patients brought out the many issues they faced, and before she knew it, being an ob-gyn was no longer just about wielding a knife, but about concern and passion for caring about women’s health. ‘I saw women struggling to fulfil even their most basic healthcare needs and I saw them struggling to make independent decisions about their bodies and their health,’ says Dr Hema. “‘What can I do?’”; “‘What can we do?’”; “‘What can we do with others?’” I began seeking answers to these questions. And what I realized was that we need to connect and collaborate.’

Over the last three decades, Dr Hema has been spurred on by this very idea of establishing connections

and collaborating. Through her practice and the multiple campaigns she has driven, she has been exposed to cross-sectional stakeholders and has built associations with the likes of Melinda Gates and Oprah Winfrey. ‘Reach every girl, every woman, connect and collaborate,’ she says. ‘Our country is so complex and so big, that even if a thousand campaigns come together, it’s just a drop in the ocean.’ And so, Dr Hema is focused on building a skilled healthcare workforce and enabling pertinent policy change. ‘If we don’t make our voices heard or don’t reach out to the policymakers, we won’t be able to bring about change,’ she believes. ‘We need to harness human resource, channelize potential and motivate people to use their power to affect change. Skilling is the need of the hour.’ In 2013, as president of FOGSI, Dr Hema was instrumental in the release of a report titled ‘Skill India’, which advocated and laid an outline for skill development in the healthcare sector. In fact, in 2018, Divakar’s Speciality Hospital was identified as a Centre for Skill Enhancement (CSE), and has since leveraged technology to train over 300 private facilities across

Karnataka, Rajasthan, Assam, Manipur, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra.

About a decade ago, Dr Hema decided she wanted her work to go beyond just providing healthcare. She wanted her work to create a larger, lasting social impact. And so, she set up the hospital's research wing, the Asian Research and Training Institute for Skill Transfer (ARTIST). 'To create real social impact, I had to move beyond my hospital and metro cities and reach the grassroots,' she says. ARTIST is dedicated to innovative research, national policy changes and skill transfer, with an eye on the socio-politico-economic dynamics that are unique to India, and how existing global solutions need to be adapted to the Indian context and thereafter suitably implemented. It brings together healthcare professionals, leaders of organizations, key opinion makers, researchers, academicians and leading clinicians. 'Our mission is to fill data gaps and affect pertinent policy change, for better health outcomes as well as to bring technical know-how to those who need it,' says Dr Hema. 'Through my work I've realized the extent of the work that's going on in India, and the kind of work that needs to be done, still.'

## WONDER WOMEN 2

One of Dr Hema's key focus areas has been what she calls 'respectful maternity care'. '30 million women deliver babies every day,' she informs. 'Just caring isn't enough. Genuine concern is important. The least we can do, as healthcare workers, is to be gentle with them, treat them with consideration and respect. Soft skills are so important in helping patients cope with whatever they're dealing with.' As president of FOGSI, she was one of the biggest champions of Manyata, an initiative that aims to positively impact maternal health outcomes in India. 'There should be no reason for a woman to not have access to quality maternal care services,' she believes. 'All our efforts are directed towards ensuring no woman dies while giving birth to a new life.' Dr Hema has also been a member of the Technical Advisory Group to the Ministry of Maternal Health and Family Planning. She is also vice-chair of the Pregnancy and Non-Communicable Diseases committee at FIGO, besides being FOGSI's ambassador to FIGO.

Her quest to do better led Dr Hema to pursue a postgraduate diploma in Medical Law and Ethics and another in Preventive and Promotive Healthcare. 'Yesterday's problems, we're solving today, and today's

## WONDER WOMEN 2

problems, we have no idea about,' she rues. 'We need to build up preventive healthcare with the view that when we prevent illness, we promote wellness.' To do this effectively, she believes we need to get a handle on statistics and data, which is wanting in our country. 'Obesity is at 37 per cent; diabetes is on the rise; the lack of awareness and moral policing around contraception – which is really preventive healthcare for abortion and STDs and needs to be seen as such – is worrying,' she states. 'Unfortunately, our priority is daily living, and our mindset is one of "let's cross the bridge when we get to it". And this is worse for women. There is so much misinformation, they often perceive every little symptom as cancer. But instead of getting medical advice, they get scared and apprehensive. Sometimes, their families put them down. And because daily living can be such a struggle for so many, even those who want to get the care they need, can't always afford it.'

To help bring preventive healthcare to the forefront, Dr Hema's work at ARTIST has brought forth the ABCDE of women's healthcare: A is for anaemia among adolescent and pregnant women; B is for building contraceptive choices; C is for cervical cancer

screening with mobile messaging; D is for diabetes care programmes; and E is for emergency obstetric care skill drills. ‘We need to look at healthcare in a wholesome manner, because nothing can be fixed in isolation,’ she asserts. ‘Women should enter their pregnancy in the pink of health, to ensure a smooth pregnancy and safe delivery. But the way women are made to feel when they go to a healthcare facility, they just end up delaying it. In spite of cervical and breast cancer being either preventable or curable, patients come to us in very advanced stages.’ Dr Hema has also been working extensively with FOGSI to bring these into mainstream healthcare.

While most medical professionals have wised up to the possibilities offered by social media and digital platforms only during the pandemic, Dr Hema has been on the ball for a very long time now, through her research work as well as through her practice. ‘You could say it’s been a passion with me, the digital media – your outreach increases manifold,’ she says. ‘We need to evolve with the changing times and with changing circumstances and constantly try to do better.’ She has been using various digital platforms



to stay available to her patients, even as she works her way through her other endeavours. Dr Hema has also used digital media to disseminate information on a variety of issues, ranging from menopausal health and diabetes to sexual health and sexual abuse, creating blogs, podcasts, animations and videos. ‘We need to involve the youth in their own well-being, and I’ve found digital platforms to be extremely effective in doing so,’ she says. ‘Our education system, which is not youth-friendly at all, has been failing them. Only about 5 per cent of the information they get is from healthcare workers, or trained, reliable sources. The rest is all from friends or the internet, but given that the internet takes the lion’s share, with 55 per cent of their knowledge coming from the web, we have really focused on tapping into that.’ Through their various collaborations and creations, we have been able to reach as many as 4 million young girls across the country, while bringing contraception and making it available to 30 per cent women of reproductive age, as opposed to an earlier mere 2 per cent.

Through the last three decades, Dr Hema has remained passionate and motivated about all the work

## WONDER WOMEN 2

she's been doing. 'These are key elements – those who work on a project should also own it,' she believes. 'I find inculcating this to be a huge challenge because there is so much mediocracy. Quality has to be maintained, otherwise your project won't last.' As a healthcare worker, Dr Hema believes taking pride in the work you do is imperative. 'Someone out there is alive today, only because a doctor did their best, gave them their best, and we need to be alive to that,' she says. 'I didn't set out to achieve anything, but I was driven, I had passion and I had a purpose. It's been a continuous journey that I can, today, look back upon with satisfaction and that I look forward to with determination.' Dr Hema is recipient of the FIGO Women Achievers Award 2015, in recognition of her contribution to the development of science and scientific research in the field of gynaecology and obstetrics. Besides multiple awards for Lifetime Achievement, she was also chosen Global Asian of the Year, 2018.