

Pankaj Sharma

Addicted to playing polo



PETER LOCKE

PANKAJ SHARMA is professor of neurology at Royal Holloway, University of London and consultant neurologist at Imperial College. His principal research interest is in the genetics of stroke, especially in high risk Asian communities in the UK and around the world. He has established one of the world's largest international stroke biorepositories for South Asian people, and his work has helped identify genes causally associated with stroke. He is a frequent media commentator on stroke and brain disorders and was named the UK's top Asian doctor at the 2015 British Indian Awards, an annual event to celebrate the achievements of leading British Asians.

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

"A paper from *Nature* in 1992 describing an association between a genetic polymorphism and myocardial infarction. It inspired me to join the field of polygenic disorders and contributed to demonstrating the need to create large, well characterised biobanks"

What was your earliest ambition?

To be an electronic engineer. I tried it for a year before realising that I preferred talking to people rather than to wires and circuit boards.

What was the worst mistake in your career?

Wanting to be an engineer; I would have been terrible.

What was your best career move?

I would have been equally content to follow several career interests, such as neurology, gerontology, and surgery. But, when told by a UK neurology professor that I would never have a career in British neurology, the choice was made for me: neurology it was, and I've never looked back.

Where are or were you happiest?

Every time my team makes a new discovery. It's a great feeling, knowing that we are the first people in the world to have discovered it.

Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

My father was in the Indian diplomatic service. Being immersed in that world from an early age, I learnt that being unable to please all of the people all of the time makes politics a tough gig. It's easy to criticise if you're not the one with whom the buck stops.

Who is the person you would most like to thank and why?

My parents, sister, wife, and children, for their unquestioning support and love.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

To the patients I couldn't help and to those with whom I made mistakes. I should have worked harder, sorry.

If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?

Invest it and distribute the annual proceeds to charities such as Plan International, a development organisation promoting children's rights.

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

A paper from *Nature* in 1992 describing an association between a genetic polymorphism and myocardial infarction. It inspired me to join the field of polygenic disorders and contributed to demonstrating the need to create large, well characterised biobanks, which are now revolutionising our understanding of common diseases.

Do you support doctor assisted suicide?

No. Give an inch, and someone (some day) will take a mile.

What book should every doctor read?

The Norm Chronicles by Michael Blastland and David Spiegelhalter: a user-friendly guide to statistics that doctors could use when explaining risk to patients. Every two cigarettes smoked takes 30 minutes off your life, but stopping smoking at age 40 adds nine years to your life expectancy.

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?

Frank Sinatra singing (*I Did It*) *My Way*. Well, I did, mostly.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

Playing polo. Thrilling, yet dangerous. Addictive, but financially crippling. Avoid at all costs!

If you could be invisible for a day what would you do?

Sit in on Oval Office meetings to see how "Nudge theory" works on a global scale.

Clarkson or Clark? Would you rather watch *Top Gear* or *Civilisation*? What TV programmes do you enjoy?

Clarkson treats authority with disdain, and for that I have considerable empathy—but there is a line that shouldn't be crossed. Individuals, their cultures, and nations have to be treated with respect. So: *Top Gear* on a Friday evening; *Civilisation* on a Sunday afternoon.

What is your most treasured possession?

My inscribed, antiquarian book collection. To be able to hold, open, smell, and read from the same book once held by greats such as Edward Jenner is living history. Oh, and my Alfa Romeo Spider.

What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?

Regrettably, my commitments mean that I fly long haul frequently. Less of a footprint, more an elephant pad.

Summarise your personality in three words

Generous. Disciplined. Maverick.

Where does alcohol fit into your life?

Only occasionally; it interrupts driving my Spider. But, if you're offering, Bollinger.

What is your pet hate?

Firstly, people who follow rules. Secondly, people in power who fail to support juniors: they forget that they were juniors once.

If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?

I'd possibly be a journalist. They get to be in the most interesting places at the most interesting times.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;351:h3960