



The Gerontological Journey of Professor Dr. Vinod Kumar

By Dr. Amit Gupta, FRCP
Fellow of Geriatric Society of India

In January 2021, Dr. Vinod Kumar was conferred the Life Time Achievement Award by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi at their 47th Annual Convocation in recognition of his outstanding contributions towards medicine and humanity.

Early in his career, Dr. Kumar recognized the significance of geriatric medicine and became the first to establish this discipline at AIIMS at a time when elder care was a low priority area in a country grappling with more pressing public health problems.

As a professor of medicine at AIIMS, Prof. Kumar's tryst with ageing began in the 1980s when he realized that the plight of his older patients was much beyond medical morbidity. To learn more, he engaged as a member of the Indian government's National Sample Survey Organization team planning a nationwide survey for socioeconomic profile of elderly persons.

His close association with Geriatric Society of India, of which he became the president in late 1980s, further triggered his interest not only in multidisciplinary elder care but also in teaching and research in this field. To strengthen these initiatives, Dr. Kumar sent his staff for international training and organized an Indo-UK Workshop on Public Health Implications of Ageing in India, with an invited delegation of six UK scientists. Among the delegates was Dr. Alex Kalache, who later became Chief of Ageing at the WHO.

Dr. Kumar organized an International Symposium on Gerontology for national, international and WHO experts to present their work and convened many other awareness programs, all in 1990s. This helped greatly in sensitizing health care providers, policy experts, and society at large. Dr. Kumar was appointed as a Member of WHO's Expert Advisory Panel on Ageing and Health by WHO headquarters in Geneva in 1996. This enabled him to engage in abundant self-learning through active exchange of views in many countries for 3 tenures over a 10-year span.



Professor Vinod Kumar with Dr. Amit Gupta. In 2021, Dr. Kumar was conferred the Life Time Achievement Award by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. CONGRATULATIONS!

These developments, with increasing vulnerabilities of a growing elderly population, led to the opening of new geriatric care facilities and departments of geriatric medicine in India. AIIMS established a separate Department of Geriatric Medicine and a newly coming up full-fledged National Centre of Ageing. Now, Geriatric Medicine was no longer a discipline to merely treat elderly patients, but also to enhance their life, autonomy, and self fulfilment.

“Many new advances are allowing us to age longer with health and happiness,” says Prof. Kumar. He further adds, “old age is not just about hormones, enzymes, and genes. It is about how you lived your life and how you take it now. There are myriad ways to knock the winds out of negativity associated with old age. Even if you crash land in old age with diseases and despair, you can still manage through lifestyle and spiritual healing.”



Government of India Lifetime Achievement Award in Ageing receiving from India's Health Minister and Minister for Social Justice & Empowerment, October, 2011

Dr. Kumar has been retired from AIIMS for 20+ years. He has received national and international recognition and 3 more Life Time Achievement Awards in Ageing, including one from Government of India in 2011.

Dr. Vinod Kumar's passion continues to this day. Opportunities have kept coming his way to provide input to Central Government Ministries, Foreign Governments, Delhi State Government, National Human Rights Commission, WHO, UNFPA, FAO, Delhi Police, NGOs and others in matters related to National Policy for Older Persons.

His other associations include National and Delhi State Government's Councils of Older Persons, Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, National and Delhi State Commissions for Senior Citizens, National Institute on Ageing, National Centre of Ageing, Government's National Conference on Ageing, National Program for Health Care of the Elderly, Standardization of Guidelines for Old Age Homes and most recently Health and Welfare Schemes for Senior Citizens submitted to the Government in 2020. His writings on healthy ageing, human rights, gender issues, spirituality, meditation, music, memory, and mind continue to explore paths to attain long health spans in old age.

India's elderly population is poised to increase to hundreds of millions of people coupled with gradual shrinkage of a working force population. Dr. Kumar believes in the possibility of a great build-up of helpless, disabled, and non-productive elderly persons soon. An onerous task is at hand to enable today's young and middle-aged citizens to reach their old age with health, happiness, and adequate capacity for the nation to continue building.

It is paramount to target all stages of life with commandments of preventive strategies like proper diet, exercise, adequate work participation, and avoidance of polluted environment, weather extremes and smoking.

Also, all persons and elderly should increasingly deploy their mental faculties to encourage socio-spiritual attitudes like friendliness, forgiveness, empathy and praying. He agrees with experts that friendliness or social connectedness imparts benefits somewhat equivalent to smoking cessation and obesity reduction, while the remaining three promote physical and mental health and mitigate many diseases through the spiritual pathway. In other words, an additional dimension to self-care for a healthy old age is also about finding a purpose in life and creating an enduring alliance with the community.



"Reaching old age with health and happiness is work of a disciplined lifetime and yet it is never too late to begin."

-Prof. Vinod Kumar