In Memory of
Jagajan “JJ” Karmacharya, M.D.
10/10/65 – 9/25/11

Ronald M. Fairman

Many, if not most of you already know that our Department of Surgery lost one of its most endearing alumni on September 25, when JJ Karmacharya was killed in a plane crash in Nepal. He was returning home to visit his mother who had developed progressive medical problems and renal failure. Accompanying him was his fiancé as well as a brother and his wife. In addition to his mother, JJ is survived by a teen-aged son and two brothers who also reside here in the United States.

JJ’s journey through life reads like a larger than life novel. Born and raised in Kathmandu, he received his medical degree from Nilratan Sircar Medical College at the University of Calcutta (MBBS), and following completion of a compulsory rotating internship was licensed to practice medicine in 1990. Following medical school he did some traveling in his homeland and and served as a Medical Officer at United Mission Hospital as well as Anandaban Leprosy Hospital in Nepal. He had a passion for motorcycles which became his signature mode of transportation when traveling over mountainous terrain to rural hospitals in his homeland. His interpersonal skills were extraordinary and when Princess Diana visited Nepal shortly after her divorce from Prince Charles, JJ was selected to accompany her on a tour of the Leprosy Hospital. When later asked to describe his impressions of the famous Princess, he reportedly stated with a smile that “she had large feet.” From 1993 to 1996 he received surgical training in the United Kingdom and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow. He developed an interest in craniofacial surgery and he corresponded directly with Dr. Linton Whitaker at Penn who encouraged JJ to come to Philadelphia. JJ arrived with his wife and very young son initially as an unpaid Research Fellow in Richard Kirschner's laboratory at CHOP in 1998. He worked at a gas station and delivered newspapers to support his family, but ultimately secured research funding. He was enormously productive academically during this period time and authored well over 25 peer-reviewed publications and presented more than 25 abstracts. Unfortunately, there was no fast track into a plastic surgery fellowship for an internationally trained surgeon, but to our advantage, JJ was accepted into the Penn general surgical training program with PGY-1 preliminary status in 2001, became a categorical resident in 2002, and graduated as a Chief Resident in 2005. During his residency he established himself as a gifted technical surgeon who loved being in the operating room, demonstrating a passion for teaching junior residents. While rotating on the HUP vascular service as a PGY-4, he realized his calling and decided upon a career in vascular and endovascular surgery.

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His curriculum vitae had the appearance of someone going up for promotion to Associate Professor of Surgery and he was one of the most sought after candidates in the vascular match. I received a call from Richard Cambria at NGH, who had JJ at the top of his match list. JJ was of course our first choice and he stayed at Penn completing his fellowship in 2007.

Following his fellowship JJ spent a brief period of time at Cedars Sinai in LA under the Chairmanship of Bruce Gewertz and from all accounts was highly respected for his technical and interpersonal skills. Omaida Velazquez successfully recruited JJ to the University of Miami three years ago and he quickly developed a robust clinical practice and a reputation as an educator. He was instrumental in securing accreditation from the ACGME for the Vascular Surgery Fellowship there this past year and was to serve as the Program Director. He became very active in the South Florida Vascular Society and partnered with Omaida and Lee Goldstein (yes, other Penn alumni) to create a Division of Vascular Surgery at the University of Miami that now clearly dominates the region. He served as Chief of Vascular Surgery at the Miami VA Hospital and provided sophisticated state of the art vascular services to veterans in the South Florida region. He continued to chase his passion for motorcycles and purchased a Ducati which he rode on the crowded city streets of Miami, much to the distress of his colleagues. He took advantage of the local geography and became an avid sailor, while continuing to travel at every opportunity.

I had the honor of participating in his memorial service at the University of Miami on October 5th and listened to colleagues and friends eulogize JJ in a conference room packed with several hundred people, standing room only. It is very clear that JJ loved life and although it ended prematurely and tragically, he lived it to the fullest. To everyone at Miami who knew JJ, he was rather larger than life, he was bold, he had true grit, and he made a difference.

In his memory, the University of Miami Department of Surgery in collaboration with the South Florida Society for Vascular Surgery has established the Dr. "JJ" Karmacharya Award and Education Fund in Vascular Surgery.

Gifts may be submitted to:
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