

PERSONAL TRIBUTE

Channi Kumar's contribution to perinatal psychiatry: a personal  
tribute from France<sup>1</sup>

Channi Kumar was born in India (Punjab) and came alone, without his family, to England at the age of 13 years: this experience surely contributed to his originality and to the openness of his mind. His medical and psychiatric training, his doctorate in pharmacology as well as his work with midwives on the maternity ward and his interest in psychology – all of these attributes led him to be open to, for example, the physiological and hormonal aspects of medication and also, especially in recent years, to the psychological and relational dimensions of maternal disease. He was also interested in the French psychoanalytical approaches but felt always exterior to this dimension.

Beyond the quantity and quality of the research articles he published in the domain of perinatal psychiatry, what impressed me about Channi was his respect for and his capacity for empathy with the distress of women with serious mental illness after childbirth – an illness that could lead a woman to abuse or reject or even, in extreme cases, to kill the child or herself (Kumar, 1997*a*, 1998).

He participated in the creation in 1981 of a mother–child unit at Maudsley Hospital in London and carried out several research projects to assess its practice (Kumar *et al.* 1995). Even at the end of his life, when he was very ill, he sometimes still went to work there, between treatments. The staff on this unit said of him that he was ‘a guide, supportive, confident, enthusiastic, and open to discussion with the health-care team. His death is a great loss but leaves us with a project and we will continue his work’.

He wanted to treat serious post partum disease, while allowing each mother who so desired to breast-feed her child and maintain or establish a bond with her child. The mother–child bond seemed most important to him (Kumar & Hipwell, 1996; Kumar, 1997*b*; Hipwell *et al.* 2000) and he considered that breast-feeding could help establish it. He nonetheless took the trouble to assess the extent to which the psychotropic drugs necessary for these mothers' treatment entered and were transmitted by breast milk in order to know precisely the risks of this decision for the child (Yoshida *et al.* 1999*a*).

He was interested not only by the mother but also by the child, who was always the focus of his concern (Kumar *et al.* 1997; Ramsay *et al.* 1998; Yoshida *et al.* 1999*b*). When, shortly before his death, I told him that the next president of the International Marcé Society would be Lynne Murray, who came to our first annual SMF meeting to present her work on child development during maternal depression, Channi Kumar told me he was relieved by this news: ‘I am reassured, with Lynne Murray, that we are not going to forget the baby while we take care of/pay attention to the mother, its very important’.

His contribution to many working meetings and conferences in France was appreciated especially because he was totally bilingual and, in addition, a gifted storyteller. Channi Kumar loved to have discussions with people from disciplines, professions and cultures different from his. He had a great capacity for adaptation, openness and respect for differences.

He joined James Hamilton and Ian Brockington in founding the international Marcé Society in 1980, and was its president between 1984–6. He suggested the name of Marcé Society after that of the French clinician Marcé who was one of the first to describe and study puerperal psychosis. Channi intended to bequeath L.V. Marcé's book *Traité de la folie des femmes enceinte nouvelles, des*

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*accouchées et des nourrices* (Treatise on psychoses of pregnant women, and newly delivered and nursing mothers) to the Psychiatric Institute where he was working. The idea in creating this society was to bring to work together the various disciplines that care for the mother and child at birth, and it is still that spirit which animates this society. When we in France decided to continue in a more official fashion the policy group begun by Nicole Guedeney, Channi's encouragement in the creation of a French-language Marcé Society (Société Marcé francophone, SMF) was enormous.

Channi Kumar's influence was important in France, especially for mother-child units and for research on post-natal depression. Several French clinicians and researchers were trained in his department and his mother-child unit. He conducted much research in collaboration with students and researchers from many countries (Augusto *et al.* 1996; Morales *et al.* 1997; Yoshida *et al.* 1997; Okano *et al.* 1998; Guedeney *et al.* 2000, etc ...). He paid attention to the rigorous and scientific verification of his many clinical intuitions.

One project that was very important to him was a cross-cultural study of post-natal depression, in which 15 countries were to participate, including France, England, Ireland, Sweden, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Portugal, Uganda, Brazil, the United States, Japan, Canada, the United Arab Emirates and Hong Kong. It was Channi Kumar who was able to bring all these researchers (some his former students) together – and help them work together in mutual respect and understanding. He had the gift of bringing out the best of everyone. He wanted to know through this study the extent to which what he observed in England was similar to the situation in other countries and to answer the question: do other cultures allow women to be depressed less often after giving birth?

During the memorial service in his honour in London in November 2000, many people pointed out his tenacity and firmness when needed, for example, to obtain funding commensurate with his ideas, and also his ability to provoke a smile on the faces of those he was talking to, by his kindness, his thoughtfulness and his humour. It is fortunate that he will not read this text, because I think he would have stopped me long ago, with his well-known modesty, saying, 'This is all very nice, but you are exaggerating, and besides I might end up believing you!' It is difficult for me to express all of the diversity of the wealth Channi Kumar brought us: we still have much to learn from him, from both the scientific and human perspectives.

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#### EDITORIAL NOTE

Professor Channi Kumar, Professor of Perinatal Psychiatry at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, and a past president of the Marcé Society, was born on 12 January 1938 and died on 12 September 2000 after several years of illness during which he maintained with great courage an active working life. He was both an author and an assessor for *Psychological Medicine* and we are pleased to publish this personal tribute.

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