

# NEONATOLOGIST LIGHTS UP IN PEDIATRIC CARE

## Dr. Rajath Athreya



### ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

I have close to two decades of experience in the field of pediatrics and neonatology. Currently I am the Lead Consultant for Neonatal Services at Rainbow Children's Hospital, Marathalli Bengaluru. This is a Level 3a accredited NICU and one of the most advanced and largest such units in Bangalore. I am also the transport lead for the hospital and we carry out some of the most complex Neonatal and pediatric retrievals by road.

I am the program director for postdoctoral fellowship courses in Neonatology (NNF and RGUHS) and faculty for DNB in pediatrics

My academic journey started with graduating with an MD in Pediatrics from Bangalore Medical College. Further to this I spent a decade in the UK initially training in some of the most renowned centers including King's college Hospital and Guys and St Thomas' Hospital in London. I worked as consultant neonatologist at University Hospital Lewisham, one of the busiest hospitals in London prior to returning to India. I was a faculty of London school of Pediatrics and Resuscitation council UK.

- ✓ I am part of PediStars a frontrunner in bringing simulation into medical training in India.
- ✓ I am an invited author for Recent Advances in Pediatrics and medical journals
- ✓ I mentor and advice health care devices and technology companies. I have been a subject matter expert for various organizations such as BIRAC and GE.
- ✓ I work with corporate organisations and hold workshops about Emotional Intelligence and well being at workplace
- ✓ I write on health related topics in newspapers and I am a regular author with ParentCircle Magazine

### INSPIRATION TO JOIN THIS SPECIALIZATION

Interestingly I briefly dabbled in two surgical specialties Ophthalmology and Orthopedics but my heart was in the care of children. Pediatrics and Neonatology are very challenging but at the same time extremely satisfying specialties. Kids have amazing resilience and it is such a joy to see a kid with



I believe in if anything is worth doing...! it is worth doing it really well.



even a chronic illness just stay happy when he is having a good day. I enjoy two aspects of my field- the reassuring role of an office pediatrician where I get to be an advocate for the child in health and illness and also the adrenaline rush of acute and intensive care. Paradoxically the day we are born was the most vulnerable day of our life; neonatal mortality has been one of the toughest to crack. Looking after extremely preterm babies, sick newborns, supporting anxious parents and families is a lot of hard work but very rewarding.

The responsibility of a neonatologist is equally onerous, what we achieve in good outcomes will ensure life long health of future generations.

### CHALLENGES BEFORE PEDIATRICS IN THIS DIGITAL CENTURY

While it is a challenge to counter the 'googled' knowledge that parents profess, which can be frankly misleading on occasions, the leverage that technology offers to further my specialty is boundless. Telemedicine, using social media responsibly, surveillance possibilities in remote areas for health workers, mining data to improve outcomes, digitization of health records and information sharing, limitless possibilities of AI from creating early warning systems in ICU to modifying health seeking behavior and effect lifestyle changes in the public are the things to look forward to. Challenges are opportunities to be harnessed and we are in exciting times!

### PROFESSIONAL HIGHS AND RECOGNITION

Medicine is one field where the highs and recognition actually come from the work we do day to day. The gratitude and feedback that we get from parents are truly priceless. I was awarded the first ever Nirmal Kesaree Gold Medal for the best outgoing MD postgraduate in the Karnataka State.

## NOT MUCH GROWTH IN PEDIATRIC STANDALONE SET-UPS?

If healthcare is about a profitable business in the short term, standalone pediatric hospitals may not appear to be good propositions. Illnesses are mainly seasonal; most children have minor illness and the cost of establishing a high end PICU and NICU demand huge investment both in infrastructure and skilled manpower. However, a fully functional multispecialty pediatric service in a children's hospital will be valued and will become both viable and sustainable in the long run. There is something about doing the right thing in the right way that will pay in the long term. Ideally there should be regionalization and networking of pediatric hospitals operating at primary-secondary and referral tertiary set ups so that right resources are available at the right places. Lack of personal health insurance cover for neonatal intensive care is another limitation. But children's hospitals are essential; business wise it may be lucrative to do thousands of short day case surgeries than look after a complex neonate who needs a diaphragmatic hernia repaired. Such ventures in some developed countries are generously supported by charities, we are yet to see organized philanthropy of that sort in India.

## MENTAL HEALTH INTEGRATION WITH PHYSICAL HEALTH

As in other fields of medicine, we need to move to holistic and preventative healthcare rather than focusing on curative medicine. Childhood is a period of emotional and neurological development with many vulnerable points through the growing period. Along with healthy physical activity, learning to deal with emotions, limited and judicious use of screen time, coping with challenges of social media and school life we see that mental health needs to be fostered right from early infancy.

## SUCCESS MANTRA

Recognising ones strengths and working on areas that need improvement is a life long process. I believe in if anything is worth doing it is worth doing it really well. Success also comes from realizing, acknowledging and positively harnessing the contribution of your team members. It is about leading by example and mentoring your team.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE HEALTH POLICY

- ✓ Focus on PPP models across healthcare spectrum from primary health care to tertiary care
- ✓ Investment in Public Health and preventive medicine as much as if not more than hospitals

- ✓ Enabling development of paramedical and nursing profession to a higher standard and availability
- ✓ Greater budget allocation for health at all levels: personal budgets to government budgets
- ✓ Overhaul of medical training and education to make it fit for purpose

## SOCIAL CAUSES CLOSE TO YOUR HEART

Within the specialty I get involved in mentoring public sector hospitals. I am part of an NGO through my school alumnus and we have taken up basic healthcare and education for children from very small hamlets and tribal areas. I would like to focus on doing something for the urban poor children who have most certainly have a lost childhood and are at a higher risk of deprivation.

## MY DAILY SCHEDULE AND WORK LIFE BALANCE

My day at work can be surreal - dealing with a critically ill baby, seeing one come through all odds, helping a parent cope with bereavement and in the next hour reassuring an other who is worried about a small dot of a rash on his baby's cheek, to managing workforce of doctors and nurses on the unit and handling 2-3 long distance transports all in a single working day. Work -life balance is difficult and is an aspect that I need to get better at! Sometimes all that one wants after getting home is to stretch legs and catch up on family time and some Netflix. I also wish to work on my own health and fitness.

## FAMILY DETAILS

I am married to Dr Nandana who is a Consultant in Pediatric Allergy and Respiratory Medicine and we both work at Rainbow. Abhinav is our lovely ten-year-old boy

## HOBBIES

I have a huge love for books and writing. Had I not pursued medicine as a career, I like to think I probably would have found place in journalism or something akin to that. Something that involved writing,

speaking and creatively packaging information or stories. I do write, have always done so. I write poems, reflective pieces, and even movie reviews! I write quite a bit on health related topics for the lay press too.

I love reading, apart from racy whodunnits I have started appreciating authors like Amitav Gosh, V S Naipual, Jhumpa Lahiri and Aravind Adiga – books that talked about real life characters and life situations. I have a good hold on my mother tongue kannada and have enjoyed the classics of Kuvempu, Bhyrappa and Shivaram Karanth.

I enjoy non-fiction too I am reading Dawkins, Yuval Noah Harari and Roopa Pai. The ideas in there have enriched me in many ways.

My second love is music. My skills in appreciation of music far outweigh my personal ability in music. I play the mandolin, a string instrument and enjoy singing. Loving good food is no talent of course but it has pushed me in to cooking. I can cook a decent meal be it Indian, Chinese or Italian, but I must confess I hate to clean up the kitchen afterwards. So my offer to cook for the weekend at home is met with equal amounts of cheers and sighs.

## BEST PLACE FOR VACATION IN INDIA AND ABROAD

We recently camped near Chanshal pass in Himachal - one can never tire of the Himalayas and I would love to keep going back. Abroad our travels have been mostly across continental Europe and parts of the USA. Italy offers the best of history, art, scenic beauty and food.

## WAY FORWARD / JOURNEY AHEAD

I would want to mentor and train future generations of neonatologists in India and also work towards collaborating with a range of people to make neonatal intensive care more affordable and accessible.

