

Gynaecological cancer surgeon is himself a tongue cancer survivor

# Been through hell, but still can't kick the butt

Deepa Suryanarayan

Cancer 'cures' smoking, they say. Many smokers give up smoking after being diagnosed with cancer. But in the case of Dr Rajendra Kerkar, a cancer surgeon, being diagnosed with cancer and even surviving it, did not work.

So addicted to cigarettes was he that the gynaecological cancer surgeon, who works at Tata Memorial Hospital, the same hospital where he was operated for tongue cancer, is literally still trying to kick the butt.

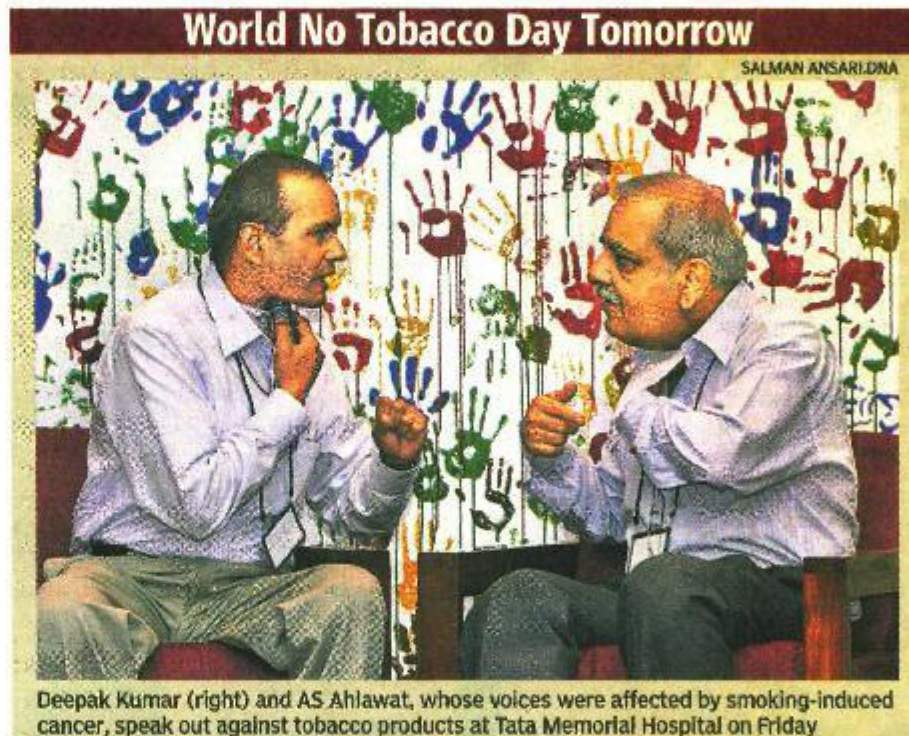
"Smoking cessation clinics and nicotine patches do help, but only on a short-term basis. A smoker really needs motivation to quit smoking," he said. Dr Kerkar first started smoking as a medical student in LTMG college in 1977. Exactly ten years after he started smoking, he was diagnosed with tongue cancer. He underwent surgery on March 23, 1988, at Tata Memorial Hospital. Six weeks in the hospital and two months of radiation therapy followed it.

— Dr Rajendra Kerkar

He rapidly lost weight. "The skin on my cheeks and neck blackened and even started peeling off. All that was left of me was skin and bones," he recalled.

It was then that Dr Kerkar quit smoking for five years. "It is the fear of death that makes people quit smoking. But once I knew I had survived cancer, I was back to smoking five to six cigarettes a day," said Dr Kerkar.

However, he has recently found his motivation. "I have started weight lifting. Since smoking hampers my breathing, I am determined to quit this time," he said. The fact that he works in Tata Memorial Hospital which has declared itself a tobacco-free zone has also helped. "The smoking ban is a boon. Many smokers will later be thankful for it," he said.



Deepak Kumar (right) and AS Ahlawat, whose voices were affected by smoking-induced cancer, speak out against tobacco products at Tata Memorial Hospital on Friday

## Pictorial warnings needed on packets

This year, the theme for World No Tobacco Day, observed on May 31, is 'pictorial warnings'.

Cancer patients from across the country came together for the first time on Friday to share the tales of their struggle.

Deepak Kumar, 43, additional commissioner, customs and excise, used to smoke up to 40 cigarettes a day. He was diagnosed

with cancer of the larynx in August 2008 and had to get it removed. "I hope the tobacco industry realises what it is doing to millions," he said, using artificial voice prosthesis to speak. Manoj Mishra, a lawyer and a pan masata consumer since 1991, was diagnosed with mouth cancer in 2007. "My livelihood is affected badly since since I am no longer able to speak for continuous stretches," he said.