

THE SEVEN-YEAR OLD SURGEON

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To give you some background, Akrit Jaswal is Indian and grew up in a rural village. He showed an exceptional gift for languages, quickly learning English as well as his native tongue, began devouring medical textbooks in English and performed his first operation at the age of 7. His knowledge grew such that local doctors began consulting him as their local expert. Needless to say this could not remain unnoticed and although he is still only 12 years-old, his talent has been recognised and he is now studying medicine at university.

Firecracker Films investigated, offered to film his story and invited him to come over to UK so that he could meet leading medical researchers. They also asked Team Focus to conduct some cognitive assessments. After being convinced by the producer that they would treat the boy with care and respect and that his interests would be placed before any concept of "good TV" we accepted to participate. Our safeguard is that we have, in writing, an agreement that the primary purpose of the assessment was to help the boy and his mother. As a result they were given a short report with the implications drawn from the results as they had a face-to-face feedback discussion. Most usefully, the inclusion of some personality measures proved to give some useful pointers for his future learning and career.

An Extract from the preview of the programme (The Times Dec 04, 2005):

My cure for cancer, by the boy genius

The 'medical Mozart' is sublimely confident of his breakthrough, he tells Cosmo Landesman

Akrit Jaswal is a young Indian who has been called "the world's smartest boy" and it's easy to see why. His IQ is 146.

He began to read Shakespeare at the age of four. He was seven years old when he carried out his first medical procedure and now at the ripe old age of 12 he tells me: "I have discovered a cure for cancer." In his home village in Himachal Pradesh, northern India, Akrit is treated like a god. The local children know him as "the genius". Adults come to him to discuss their ailments and prescriptions. He is a prodigy who has been touted in America and sold to the media as a Mozart of modern medicine. But Akrit has his critics and plenty of people are sceptical about the claims made on his behalf. Some say he is just a very bright boy with an exceptional memory but no real gift for science. Others claim he is the victim of pushy parents who stole his childhood.

In person Akrit doesn't look like your typical boy genius. He doesn't have the big goggles, the jacket with a row of Biro's in the top pocket and the boy-wonder bow tie. He has the typical jeans-and-trainers look of a 12-year-old. He is anxious to present himself as just an ordinary boy, but one with an extraordinary brain. "I'm just like any other kid, except when it comes to talking about science." He even boasts he's no "bookworm" or a "boffin". "No, I don't spend all my time reading and studying," he tells me. "I was given a copy of Stephen Hawking's book, but I've never read it."

Akrit came to public attention when in 2000 he performed his first medical procedure at his family home. He was seven. His patient — a local girl who could not afford a doctor — was eight. Her hand had been burnt in a fire, causing her fingers to close into a tight fist that wouldn't open. Akrit had no formal medical training and no experience of surgery, yet he managed to free her fingers. For the first time in five years she was able to use her hand.

I ask him how he managed to carry out the procedure; wasn't he nervous? "No, I wasn't. I have read many medical books and attended many operations. I think I did a better job than most surgeons. They would have opted for plastic surgery, but I didn't need to."

The fact that carrying out such a procedure is illegal doesn't worry him. "Yes, it was illegal. But it does no harm. It's good for mankind. So what if it goes against dead old medical ethics?" Akrit's interest in science began at the age of four. "It was then that I read Gray's Anatomy and books on chemistry. I studied physics up to A-level standard. I was fascinated by science because it could

answer all the questions I had about life — how we got here and why we are here. But now I'm older I have to find new answers."

One answer he is confident of finding is a cure for cancer. It's this claim that has brought him worldwide media attention, admiration . . . and derision.

So how does a 12-year-old with no medical training and no lab experience discover a cure for cancer? "I actually made my discovery when I was eight. I did it by reading books on cancer and getting information from the internet. My cure aims at the modification of malformed genes that cause cancer and their successful repair either by the activation of enzymes or direct modification of genotoxic drugs."

Is this boy deluded? A victim of his parents' high expectations? Common sense tells us that 12-year-old boys do not cure cancer, but our belief in the power of the child prodigy makes us wonder: maybe it is possible.

Akrit recently visited London to participate in a forthcoming television documentary about his life (to be shown on Five in January). While here he achieved his dream of trying out his ideas for curing cancer on researchers at Imperial College.

Professor Mustafa Djamgoz, who spent a number of weeks with the boy, told me: "There's no doubt he is a brilliant boy. He really knows his stuff and has put his heart, soul and mind into finding a cure for cancer. But his solution is not that novel. In theory it could work, but it would be premature to say he has found a cure."

Society is ambiguous in its attitude to child prodigies such as Akrit. We admire them, envy them, would like our own children to have their gifts — yet we also want to believe those who are blessed are also cursed with all sorts of emotional and psychological problems. But Akrit refuses to play the victim and is annoyed by reports he was never allowed a normal childhood. "Oh come on," he says with weary resignation. "I had plenty of friends to play with when I was a child and, yes, I had nursery rhymes too."

"Don't you feel your parents put too much pressure on you to succeed?" I ask. "No, I never feel that. My parents never put pressure on me. In fact they're the ones who are always saying you should rest and chill out." I suspect this is not the case. Akrit has long been under considerable pressure to succeed, especially by his father. When Akrit was eight his father resigned from his job as an economics adviser in Delhi so he could devote himself to his son's talents. He moved the family back to their home village and set up a school for his son so his talents could be nurtured. He began a crusade to get the boy into a medical school when he was eight, but no Indian school would accept anyone under 17.

Akrit's father and mother have since separated. She says it was the frustration of not getting the boy into medical school that destroyed the marriage. Before he left, Akrit's father said: "Call me when you cure cancer." The boy has not seen him for more than a year.

At present, Akrit is attending university where he is doing a BSc undergraduate course in medicine. It can't be easy being the only 12-year-old there. The question that hangs over the boy's head is this — will he ever be able to live up to everyone's expectations? What happens if his ideas do not in fact cure cancer? "I will be embarrassed, but I will never give up trying," he says.

Talking to him you get the impression that the most intense pressure to succeed comes from within. Although there's no doubting he is a very gifted boy, such children do not usually go on to do great things when they grow up. Linda Silverman, of the Gifted Development Centre in America, who examined Akrit when he was eight, makes the point that "most gifted people do not seek or achieve fame".

That's certainly true of recent British prodigies. Remember Ruth Lawrence who, at the age of 12, went to Oxford to study mathematics? Today she lives in Israel as an Orthodox Jew. And the ones who go on to succeed can often turn out pretty weird (Bobby Fischer) or die prematurely (Mozart). Only time will tell if Akrit has been blessed or cursed.