The term Philately is used to define the hobby of stamp collecting. It originates from the Greek word ‘philos’ meaning loving and ‘atelie’ meaning collection of stamps. Philately is a delightful hobby that sharpens and satisfies your aesthetic tastes. Stamps are appealing to look at and fun to collect for many. Educational value of thematic philately is largely unrecognised. Meaningful collection expands one’s knowledge and process of learning becomes more interesting through visuals and brief write-ups. In addition, it cultivates a meticulous and focussed attention to detail. Commemorative stamps are issued, as the name suggests, commemorating important events, prominent personalities in various fields, aspects of nature, anniversaries etc. These stamps are only available at Philatelic Bureau counters, as they are printed in limited quantities unlike definitive issues.

First stamp in the world was introduced in England as penny black in 1840. This was followed by every country and later commemorative stamps were introduced. Collectors usually use catalogues as encyclopedias to acquire information. Over the years with millions of stamps pouring from different countries they have taken 5 volume forms, like Stanley Gibbons of England, Scott in USA, Yvette Tellier in France, and Michel in Germany.

Stamp collection is defined in two distinct fashions. Traditional philatelist looks at the production characteristics and functional parameters of the stamp. A thematic (or topical) philately studies the design and educational impact of stamps. Thematic philately is naturally very popular. For these collectors, stamps are not mere colourful pieces of paper, but signify the country’s cultural history, their concerns, pride, struggles, achievements, and triumphs. They have a great educational value and thus have become a fascinating avocation for many.

Medical History, learned through philately, is a novel, unusual and interesting method. However, philatelic version of history cannot be totally comprehensive. It must be realised that due to lack of material on some subjects, there may be omission of events and the individual’s role in the history. Nevertheless, by no means it limits the importance of those persons and their key contribution.

The doyen of Medical history, Fielding H. Garrison, an American military physician of the Army Medical Library, was probably the first to realise the importance of stamps as a resource for medical history, as early as in 1929. The term was first suggested by him when he wrote the first article on the field in 1929 and hence he can be considered father of medical philately. He stated “Currencies which existed from ancient times have often been used as important historical evidence. The use of stamps as research material for medical history has just begun; however it will provide a promising research resource in the near future”.

Although the field of medical philately is quite specialised, it interests not only physicians but also people with diverse background, like nurses, pharmacists, medical historians and other paramedical people. Specialised medical stamp collection has apparently become popular with some physicians. Amidst the hectic schedule of their professional life they find this to be a relaxing, self-educating, and an amusing activity. Investment can be small or significant and storage is no problem.

Akira Furukawa published his 480 page hardcover book “Medical History through Postage Stamps” in Japanese (1984) and subsequently translated in English (1994). Although in need of revision, the detailed information provided for each stamp makes it a valuable resource for medical philatelists, the world over.

Medical philately write-ups were earlier found in Philatelic press but rarely in Medical Journals. Today, there are at least five Study Groups and five Journals dedicated to Medical Philately in the world (two are in English). These are Scalpel & Tongs (USA), Medi-theme (Great Britain), Philatelia Medica (Germany), Mediphilia (Romania) and Stethoscope in Japan. Medical biographical vignettes were published in JAMA (USA) from July 1961 onwards by Mark Shampoo and Kyle. These have been published in two volume compilations. From 1985, they wrote the series- Stamp vignettes in Mayo Clinic Proceedings. These have been published as Medicine & Stamps volume three. Presently all are out of print.

Today, medical philately can include a vast variety of topics like medical personalities, blood donation, cancer, medicinal plants and organ transplantation, to mention a few. During the Diamond Jubilee of APICON
celebration in 2005, I had put up an exhibition of my collection, with up to 50 subheadings.

Personalities include renowned medicos and others with contribution important to medicine, who participated in the advancement of medical care to the level we enjoy today. Others, known to be physicians, have become more famous in other fields and are often called medical truants or “deserters”.

It is distressing to note that currently, medical students and health care providers receive very little instruction in the history of medicine. This is undoubtedly due to today’s overburdened curricula. Rapid and great advances and discoveries of recent years have also tended to eclipse the work of early pioneers. However it is a noble theme, stimulating interest in the achievements of the past. This may help us to solve the problems of the present and must constitute the foundation of all future progress in medical science. “The longer you look back, the further you can look forwards” said Winston Churchill while addressing Royal College of Physicians in March 1944.

The readers of JAPI have become familiar with Medical Philately (Medical theme on postage stamps), through the columns of the Journal, over the last thirteen years. The series was first started in August 2001, when Late Dr. P. J. Mehta (past editor of JAPI), suggested that I write for JAPI. In 2001, I realised that my collection of years, staying just idle, could at least be shared with my colleagues through the medium of JAPI, as a monthly Column on Medical Philately. With the courtesy of The Editorial Board-JAPI, a monthly column was started from August 2001 issue, with the idea of depicting biographical history of medicine through philately, as far as possible with the collection.

Medical philately articles in JAPI over the years have mainly included personalities with intermittent foray in topics of interest, like Anaesthesia and Critical care, HIV and TB, Trypanosomiasis in India, Electricity and heart, Dengue epidemic, and a series on Endocrine disorders. These articles depended on availability of material at the time.

It was heartening to realise that other members of our fraternity were stimulated and started contributing. They were encouraged to do so, notwithstanding the chronology of historical events, and thus medical thematic material like Cancer and AIDS was provided. The main among other authors’ are- Pradeep Rangappa, Consultant Intensive Care Physician at Columbia Asia Hospital, Bangalore, K P Anand, Consultant –Medicine and DDMS Uttar Bharat Area, Bareilly Cantt, and Frederica Guaraldi, Pasquali-from Malpighi General Hospital, Bologna, Italy, who wrote a Series on Endocrine Philately.

Over the years I have received requests for the publication of the articles in a single book format, from various people. Dr. Shashank Joshi, former editor of JAPI, tried his best to get the book published. Unfortunately, it did not materialise then, due to lack of enough sponsors. Presently to fill this gap Dr. Siddhartha Shah and Editorial board of JAPI have decided to come out with a special issue on medical philately. An attempt is made to restore the chronological order of all articles by birth of personalities and topics of interest published so far. The revision is made when necessary, and new material is added with availability of recent philatelic material. I am sure as a compilation it will be received well.