

Interview: Professor Lalitha Mendis

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Vidyajyothi Professor Lalitha Mendis, President of the SLMA, former Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo and former Director of the Postgraduate Institute of Medicine, Colombo is an eminent personality who is much loved and respected by all in the field of Medicine. Indeed, she needs no further introduction. A devoted teacher as well as a loving mother, she shares her views on current trends in Medicine, work in Sri Lanka, experiences as young doctor and her personal experiences of family life.

Childhood experiences

When reminiscing about her childhood, Professor Mendis speaks of her parents with great affection. Her father was a dedicated school principal and her mother was a teacher. “They were both very widely read people”, she says. “Our house was full of books.” What helped her was not the fact that they were teachers, but that they taught her good values.

Speaking of her mother, Professor Mendis says, “She was like an English scholar. She taught us the love of literature and music, not to pass exams, but to appreciate them”. As a child, she and her brother were always encouraged by their father to argue with him and there were heated debates at home. During their school holidays, they were taken by their father to the courts to observe the court cases, which also added a lot to their childhood experiences.

Life as a Medical Student

Reminiscing about her student days, she recalls how she had to undergo an interview before entering Medical College. Professor Mendis feels that some sort of aptitude test besides the Advanced Level examination is necessary to make sure that the most suitable candidates enter the profession. “Medicine is a vocation, it is not like any other job, you have to be prepared to serve with care and compassion. Every human being in this world is not capable of serving with compassion and care, and it is best that the people who you select for medicine have that quality in them”. She says that it is not impossible, citing examples from certain Indian Universities and our very own Faculty of Architecture of the University of Moratuwa.

Early days as a doctor

Professor Lalitha Mendis’ first seven years as a young doctor were spent in Kuliyaipitiya and Mawathagama working as a house officer and a Medical Officer of Health respectively. She recalls those days with fond memories, where she had the opportunity to serve the people at a very personal level. The innocent appreciation shown by the people towards her service was her reward and is something that she will cherish for a lifetime. “All doctors should take the opportunity to go to the periphery and serve the rural poor, after all 85% of our population is considered rural and this town living is unreal: it is not Sri Lanka”.

Working in Sri Lanka

Professor Mendis, on completion of her post graduate studies in the United Kingdom decided to settle down in Sri Lanka. Her primary reason for doing so was to take care of her parents who were living in Sri Lanka. Her second reason was that she, together with her husband felt that they had an obligation towards serving the country they were born in to, and provided them with a free education. Professor Mendis is very firm in her view that students should value the free education received in Sri Lanka and should give back to the country something in return.

Experiences as the Dean

Professor Lalitha Mendis' tenure as the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo spanned a period of six years. One of the most significant developments that occurred during this period was the curriculum change and the infrastructural changes that occurred with it. She remembers the great difficulties faced by the staff and the student bodies to make the current facilities available to the students. It is her wish that the current student population will value and appreciate these facilities and make full use of them.

New Trends in Medicine

"There has been a globalization of medical practice and medical education," she says. She explains that while medical practice has become more investigation oriented in Western countries, such a practice cannot be afforded in Sri Lanka. She feels that maintaining clinical skills is important. Speaking of new trends in Medical Education, she says: "We have to give the benefit of new thinking in medical education to students." She emphasizes the fact that learning styles have changed when compared with the past. This led her to introduce a Medical Education Unit while she was Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo. The new trend aims to make doctors not only skilled and competent but good communicators with reflective, inquiring minds.

English

"During our time, the standard of English was much better", Prof Mendis says. "A huge advantage for us was that our English was good. Even when we went abroad and studied for post graduate exams, this was an advantage. We would talk and write very well and people respected us". As students in the faculty, they conversed in English and this helped students who were weak to improve their language skills. "Students have to better their communication skills in English. The grammar need not be perfect, but you should be able to tell what you want in a cohesive manner. The language of Medicine is English and it is very important for us to work as doctors; to study, to learn and to read fast. If you take half an hour to

read a paragraph, it slows you down and it affects your performance" she points out. Prof Mendis recommends that each batch should decide to talk in English till, for example, 12 noon. "The motivation should come from the students to improve their language", she emphasizes.

New entrants

She advises new entrants to the Medical Faculty to get out of their old learning skills and open their minds to the new. She advises students to be prepared to mix with students from other religions, ethnic groups as well as those of higher or lower social standards. She emphasizes that there should be no segregation of Sinhala and Tamil students. She feels that this segregation is the result of students talking to each other in their mother tongues, Sinhala and Tamil. "Poor students should not be ashamed while better off students should not flaunt what they have; it creates a barrier," she advises.

Personal experiences

"If you want to do something, go ahead and do it," says Professor Mendis. "But balance it well with your family's needs. That is the difficulty women face." She feels that medical students and lady doctors should choose their partners carefully. She stresses the importance of making sure before marriage that the future husband would be in agreement with their wife's plans of pursuing a career. She also feels that men should realize that the wife is a separate individual and not their appendage. "My personal experience was that I was very lucky," she says. "My husband never stood in my way; he never said 'don't do this' or 'don't qualify'." But she also took care to arrange things the way he liked. She had her two children whilst she was in the Ministry of Health and built up her family first before qualifying and joining the University. In order to keep the balance between her work and her family, she had to do her work during the dead of night or during the early hours of the morning while the rest of her family was asleep. "I think I have the ability to manage it all. In every aspect I have done my best," she smiles.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Lao-tzu, *The Way of Lao-tzu*

Chinese philosopher (604 BC - 531 BC)