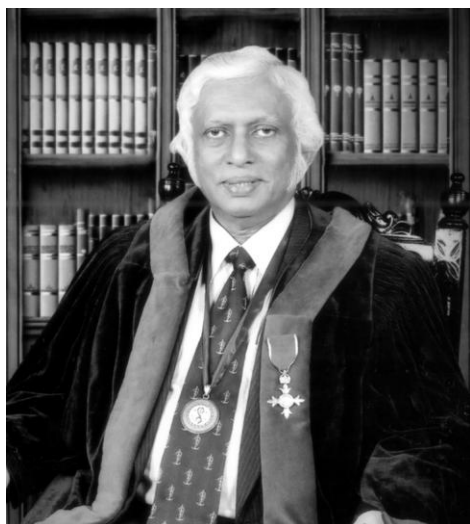


If you are sure of yourself, stand your ground! **An interview with Professor Sanath P. Lamabadusuriya**

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Introduction

Senior Professor and former chair in Paediatrics and former Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo, Professor Sanath P. Lamabadusuriya is a well known and much respected medical academic. He has made an immense contribution to teaching, research and the practice of medicine both in Sri Lanka and overseas. He has also been awarded a prestigious MBE by HRH Queen Elizabeth II for his contributions to the field. Here, Prof. “Lama” as he is affectionately known, shares his experiences with our editorial team.

What was the initial period like?

My choice was to specialize in the medical side rather than the surgical side, since surgery never attracted me. I graduated at the top of my batch and so I had the opportunity to get my choice of appointment for internship. I chose the professorial medicine unit for the first 6 months under Professor K. Rajasuriya and for the next 6 months, to the surprise of many, I chose to work under Dr. P.R. Anthonis, as working with the professor of surgery at that time you were more a clerk than anything else. To this date I believe I made the correct choice. Initially the unit had a SHO, but he left during my 2nd month and I had to take on his

role as well. I had a lot of responsibility, which I enjoyed thoroughly.

How did you become an academic?

After my internship, I served at the Chest Hospital, Welisara for a period of nine months. During this time two vacancies were advertised at the Colombo Medical Faculty; Lecturer/Senior Lecturer in Pathology and Lecturer/Senior Lecturer in Paediatrics. I applied for both posts because I always liked the academic setting. The interviews for the post in Pathology were first, and to this date I’m thankful to Prof. Gerry Cooray for not selecting me!

When I went for interview for the post in Paediatrics, I found that it was chaired by the Vice Chancellor at that time, Mr. Walwin De Silva. Prof. Rajasuriya, Prof. Priyani Soysa and Prof. Chapman were also there; quite a panel! Many in the field of paediatrics had also applied for the post, but one by one they got knocked out. Prof. Soysa asked me why I didn’t do paediatrics for my internship and my reply was “I did medicine for the first 6 months, so I could not do paediatrics for the 2nd 6 months”. Of course she knew it was a hollow answer, but this was not known to the non medical people in the panel. I was selected for the job!

What were your first experiences as an academic?

We as undergraduates never took paediatrics seriously because there were only 2 questions in the clinical medicine paper, and one could easily pass medicine without knowing much paediatrics. Therefore I had not done much reading in paediatrics. Before assuming duties I wanted to read up, but the only book I had was a book by Prof. C.C. De Silva and Mrs. Vishvanathan, meant for mothers!

I assumed duties on the 1st April 1969. In the beginning, I was sharing responsibilities with 2

house officers, and had first on call duty for 3 months.

I received a Colombo Plan scholarship to go to UK to do my MRCP and DCH. The British Council had arranged a course in paediatrics at the Institute of Child Health, but I informed them that I would prefer a job in the National Health Service. I applied and was selected for the post of SHO in neonatal paediatrics at the Whittington Hospital in North London. I was on call every other night, but the salary was 120 pounds, much more than the 72 pounds I would have received from the scholarship! Max Friedman, the Consultant whom I worked with didn't allow reading notes when presenting cases and this was a training by itself. During this appointment I had to sleep in the unit, if a baby was being ventilated. During this very busy and intensive appointment, I managed to pass the MRCP (London) examination at the first attempt.

I was sent to the UK for a period of two years, but within 6 months, I had finished the exams. I was faced with two options, to work as a registrar and get a better salary, or to get some research experience but to manage with the scholarship money. I had no one to ask for advice, and fortunately decided to get into research and forego the monetary benefits. To this date, I am very happy I made that decision.

I started reading for my PhD in 1972, with Dr. John Harries at the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children and Institute of Child Health. However, my leave was about to finish in 1973 so I applied for an extension of leave. The dean didn't like the idea but Prof. Soysa backed me and managed to get the leave extended. If they had not, I would not have stopped my PhD to come back, and my career would've taken a different course. I wouldn't have come back to Sri Lanka.

During this period of research I had to fall back to the scholarship allowance of 72 pounds again. I worked for the Southern Relief Service during the weekends and for the 20 hours of work I was paid 30 pounds. I was provided with a chauffeur driven radio car and I had to visit patients' homes because their GPs were not available. I criss-crossed the London streets innumerable times, visiting homes.

I resumed duties at the LRH on 1st January 1975. People were happy to see me as many were not returning after foreign training, at that time.

During the first 3 months I was only entitled to a 3 figure salary, but that was more than enough. I was single, living with my parents, the bus travel cost only 25 cents either way and the lunch was Rs. 1.60, so I had a comfortable life. I brought a bicycle in my sea luggage, but arriving at the LRH in a bath of sweat didn't help my work, so I opted to get a car with a car permit. I thoroughly enjoyed teaching and I got to know the students very closely.

Tell us about your experience at the Galle Medical Faculty.

The Faculty of Medicine, University of Ruhuna, was established in the late 70s and I was chosen for the post of Founder Professor of Paediatrics. One of my biggest achievements there was the Cleft Palate Project, in collaboration with the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children. The Co-Director of the project was Dr. Michael Mars, Consultant Orthodontist, at the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, London. In addition to the service rendered to the patients, it also had the world's largest database on unoperated cleft lip and palate with more than 1000 patients. It was so successful that the BBC even made a film about the project called "When to Mend Faces". The film was televised in 1992 in a programme titled QED and won an award

A lady who had seen this documentary was interested in donating £250,000 for a health development project. They contacted me, but I was on sabbatical leave, and the project was awarded to the disability studies unit of the Colombo North Medical Faculty. The money was used to start a diploma course to train speech therapists, and as a direct result, we now have nearly 60 speech therapists in Sri Lanka.

In 1988, during the final few months of my sabbatical leave in Saudi Arabia, many of my friends wrote to me advising me against returning to Sri Lanka as the political situation was unstable. I however, returned, to the surprise of many! I had no personal threats, and I did not go on strike a single day.

A few years later, the chair fell vacant in Colombo, and I returned to Colombo as Professor of Paediatrics.

How is your teaching experience overseas different to the one in Sri Lanka?

The British students ask questions whenever they are in doubt, whilst our students are very subdued. The foreign students also have a very broad knowledge and are more mature. They may not know the nitty-gritty of paediatrics, but you can have a decent conversation with them on just about any subject. May be it's our "epa" culture; there is no encouragement for anything!

Can you give us some tips about handling children?

Handling children is an art that is developed through experience. The key to it is a conducive

environment and age and gender appropriate toys. The power of toys is amazing!

Any special message to our students?

Spend more time in the wards rather than in the library; because you never know when you might need what you have seen. A x-ray of the chest which had an azygous system I saw as an undergraduate helped me in my MRCP clinicals!

And if you are sure of yourself, stand your ground!