

## **An opportunity to inspire another generation – perseverance**

*Prof. Priyani E. Soysa*

*Emeritus professor of paediatrics, University of Colombo  
MD DSc FRCP (Lond & Edin) FRCP CH (Lond.) DCH (Eng) FCCP, FSLCP, FCGP, F Nat. Acad. Sciences*

It is amazing how I reached the portals of medicine. My father consulted Ms. Roper, principal of Princess of Wales College and also an aunt whose daughter was a doctor as to whether I was physically fit to follow the six year long course of medical training. He was therefore more than pleased with my results at the final MBBS.

When I applied to go abroad later, my paediatric guru thought that I could wait another year as he was sure I would easily qualify for paediatric training. But the public service commission did not agree to send a person with a third class over a first class MBBS and dissented with paediatric selectors' initial choice. It was thus another amazing grace!

I enjoyed proceeding to London by steamer, sent on a first class ticket by the Ministry of Health. I enrolled for training at the Great Ormond Street Hospital for sick children and passed the Diploma in Child Health within three months.

I was dressed very traditionally in saree and took pains to match the grey suits of the British women doctors when I went up for the examination. An Indian woman had been told that she could not appear in a flashy garment to blind the eyes of sober gentlemen examiners.

I was in my late twenties when I reached home with the required paediatric qualifications. My father once again had done something amazing viz. he had paid my application fee for the MD examination. The other women who had registered for the same examination withdrew, paving the way for me to be the first woman in Sri Lanka to pass the MD of the University of Ceylon.

When my guru Prof. C.C. de Silva retired, my application for the vacant post went by registered mail from Kurunegala where I was serving as a consultant paediatrician. Thanks to an eminent

person like Dr. E. M. Wijerama, I was considered for selection. Once again, amazingly my father had encouraged me to qualify in the Sinhalese language at the London Matriculation. (Besides Latin which was essential for medical entrance)

This competence further qualified me to be appointed as professor of paediatrics. This was another first in my list viz. the first woman professor in the academic system of Sri Lanka. The confidence with which I appeared before Prof. Hettiarachchi, Professor of Sinhalese was with the fluency in my mother tongue, acquired in school and in the teaching of paediatrics to nurses in Jaffna, Ratnapura and Kurunegala.

I had accepted that post without consultant private practice. But that liberty of private practice was bestowed by the ministry of health to university clinical consultants in a very short time after my appointment to the university.

I adhered to the rules of private practice, keeping strictly to the permitted times and never charging poor patients except according to their purse. Briefly, there was no fleecing of any patient.

I have really a strong passion for research which perhaps was first inspired by Prof. C.C. de Silva when I was his research assistant soon after my clinical training. Another first was when I read the first paper on "Salmonellosis" at the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science (SLAAS) and another guru, Prof. P. B. Fernando came to listen to me!

Research involves a rigid process to search the unknown. Writing a research proposal is a scientific way of thinking, a search for past published literature, planning the methodology with a statistical approach so that data collected and presented is factual, planned from the structure of method and conclusively presented with

recommendations for policy makers to put into practice.

Collaborative research is the order of the day, which both 'Natural Resources, Energy and Science Authority of Sri Lanka' (NARESA) and the 'National Science Foundation' have promoted. There is so much of specialized thinking and knowledge even in a solitary discipline that a multi-disciplinary approach to a problem is necessary. Such teamwork encompasses a cooperative approach by individuals who have to subdue aggressive attitudes and in short achieve a blend of constructive research.

The papers I have presented and published have gone a long way both nationally and internationally. I overcame the lethargy of local editors and sought international acceptance. Thus I impressed the United Nations agencies and bilateral organisations in Canada and Scandinavia. I relied on these large grants and was soon recognized by the UNICEF, World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Union of Sciences and international paediatric organisations. I was appointed as an adviser (in the Advisory Group on Nutrition) to the highest UN body on Nutrition viz. the Subcommittee of Nutrition (SCN) to the UN. From this, I was made Chairperson of Maternal and Child Nutrition. I was also in the Commonwealth Medical Association as Vice Chairperson to Central Asia.

These were exhilarating days, travelling to the far outposts of the UN in New York, Paris, Geneva, Rome, Bangkok, etc. These were no 'saree safaris' but intended on acquisition of knowledge, which overflowed to my motherland on breastfeeding, infant and young child nutrition, studies on low birth weight in Ceylonese and other publications

like 'Nutrition of women'. Some of this work was also published in a UNESCO series.

There was another cap of the general sciences that I wore as the General President of SLAAS and Director General of NARESA and Chairperson of National Science Foundation. This took me to deliberations of the International Union of Sciences where I met Nobel Prize winners.

My training in clinical genetics in Denmark (Copenhagen and Odense) and Newcastle-upon-Tyne (on a Senior Commonwealth Fellowship) have not only been of benefit in my clinical practice but also in teaching undergraduates and postgraduates and also promoting other academics for genetics training abroad. It also led the WHO to fund the Genetics Unit in the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo.

Although Nutrition was my 'bread and butter', I have researched in many other areas. Immunization trends and rotavirus diarrhoea and salmonellosis have also been high on my list of interests. I regularly studied trends in morbidity and mortality in children thus encompassing many areas of emerging diseases like dengue.

I was rewarded by the Sri Lanka Medical Association as the Centenary Orator. Recently I acquired the 'title' – 'Legend in Nutrition'. I would refrain from being boastful of international and national professional awards received for my very hard work, rising early and sleeping late without neglecting a caring spouse (who was busy as a surgeon) and a family of four wonderful children, now women excelling in their own fields. Perseverance is essential, absolutely, for one to achieve something in life.