

Interview: Professor Colvin Goonaratna

Sahan Guruge and Thisara Perera



Colvin Goonaratna, Emeritus Professor of Physiology is a person familiar to successive generations of medical students who have benefited from the many years of his service as a teacher. Professor Colvin Goonaratna is a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London and Edinburgh, a fellow of the Sri Lanka National Academy of Sciences, a fellow of the Ceylon College of Physicians, a honorary fellow of the College of Surgeons of Sri Lanka, a honorary fellow of the College of General Practitioners of Sri Lanka and a honorary DSc of the University of Colombo. His achievements far and wide in many fields are so numerous that it is difficult to compress all of it to a single article. Although retired from academic medicine today, he still finds himself actively involved in many aspects of teaching medical students.

Formative Years

He was born as the eldest child of the late Louis de Fonseka Warnasooriya Goonaratna and Olivia Charlotte Goonaratna in Moratuwa. His father was a government surveyor who retired as Assistant Superintendent of the Surveyor General's department.

Prof. Colvin Goonaratna began his schooling at Palliyagodella Temple School in Rawatawatta and Prince of Wales' College, Moratuwa followed by Royal College, Colombo. Recollecting his school days he says, "I was quite unremarkable as a student and never won even a single class prize." Misfortune befell him as he lost sight in one eye

completely due to an injury received at a hockey match, which prevented him participating in competitive sports. But young Colvin persevered, working with vision thus partially compromised from the age of 12 years.

Tracing a path in medicine

On asking what his motivation was for selecting a career in medicine, he replies that it was not a conscious decision. In a lighter vein he says that his parents consulted an astrologer who predicted that according to his horoscope he would become a lawyer or a doctor.

He entered the faculty of medicine, Colombo in the year 1956. He modestly says that he was not the most studious person at school and his school teachers were not immediately able to believe his achievement in entering medical faculty. On entering the faculty and discovering the world of medicine he happened upon many brilliant personalities of the day; he recalls with fondness anecdotes about Prof. Senaka Bibile, the eminent Professor of Pharmacology and Dr. K Rajasuriya, the famed Consultant Physician. He fondly recalls memories of playing bridge in the student common room, much like today's medical students who are seen to be engrossed in games of carrom.

He completed internship in the year 1962 and his post-intern period was to see him appointed to the General Hospital Badulla. Although it was an area ridden with Malaria at the time he recalls that these were his happiest days. He says 'doctors were treated almost like gods at the time, so much so that even trains could be delayed at the Badulla station on a doctor's request!' Later on he was transferred to the Leprosy hospital at Handala. He utilized this opportunity to produce two articles on history of Leprosy in Ceylon which were published in the prestigious journal 'Medical History'.

Academic success

In 1969 he joined the Department of Physiology of the Colombo Medical Faculty as a Research Assistant and was made a lecturer in 1970. The

same year he was sent for training to the University College London, among the best Professorial Medical Units in the United Kingdom. His experiences in the UK taught him much about good ward practices and he stresses the importance of involving nursing staff in the holistic care of patients and cultivating a good bed-side manner. Another of those lessons learnt that he stresses on is refraining from discussing sensitive issues in front of patients.

In 1973 he obtained a PhD in Renal Physiology and in the same year passed the MRCP examination. It is notable that the rare privilege of exemption from viva voce examination was granted to him.

A Turning point

Back home in Sri Lanka in 1982 he found himself in the midst of a political campaign, having been appointed as honorary physician to the presidential candidate of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Mr. Hector Kobbekaduwa. Taking a leave of absence of 2 months from his post of the Professor of Physiology of Ruhuna University he joined the excitement and turmoil of campaign politics. The experiences at the campaign trail served as the backdrop to an article published in the British Medical Journal in the year 1984. The aftermath of the political campaign was a difficult time for Professor Goonaratna, and he left his motherland, first to India and then on to Saudi Arabia, where he was appointed as an Associate Professor in King Khalid University Hospital medical school.

In 1984 he returned to Sri Lanka and was reappointed as Professor of Physiology at the University of Ruhuna and in 1990 he was appointed Professor of Physiology in the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo. He was made an Emeritus Professor of the University of Colombo following his retirement in the year 2003.

A many faceted life

In 1996 he was elected President of the apex professional body of the Sri Lankan medical profession, Sri Lanka Medical Association. In the same year as his retirement he was elected President of the Sri Lanka Association for Advancement of Science (SLAAS) by its council in appreciation of services rendered by him to the association and to the field of science in Sri Lanka. He received the Prime Minister's 'Visvaprasadini' award in recognition of his contributions to science education in year 1996 and received the

prestigious 'Vidyajothi' award in 2005, which is the highest national award given in the field of science in Sri Lanka.

In 1988 he was honoured by being appointed as the co-editor of the prestigious Ceylon Medical Journal (CMJ), where he worked along with his senior co-editor Dr. C. Uragoda. He strived successfully to restore the Ceylon Medical Journal to its former glory among international scientific journals. He spearheaded the formation of a functioning editorial board and laid down an editorial policy and guidelines for authors. Prior to his stewardship the CMJ had come to the brink of being delisted from the prestigious international index of journals 'Index Medicus'. The hard work that he put in helped reverse the tide and allowed the CMJ to maintain its international standing. Today he talks with modest pride about his long and fruitful stewardship of the Ceylon Medical Journal, where he currently serves as Editor Emeritus.

He was appointed as Chairman of the Sri Lanka State Pharmaceutical Corporation (SPC) in 1994 which was then running at a loss. He says of his appointment; "I felt that they needed me as SPC Chairman much more than I needed the job". He had to rapidly acquire skills in administration and management which served him well in his stewardship of the SPC. He says "I learnt it the hard way" and was able to win the hearts and minds of the employees. Under his guidance it became a profitable institution which for many years before had been a drain on state resources. He implemented various social-marketing strategies in educating the public via radio and television programmes. He also took steps to make medical professionals aware about the importance of using generic drug names in prescribing and took initiative to reach out to doctors via sponsorship of meetings of clinical societies. Quality assurance of the products of SPC was a priority for him due to public misconceptions that had taken hold regarding generic drugs as of poorer quality.

He was the force behind the resurrection of the Sri Lanka Prescriber in 1994, which had become irregular in publication at that time. He believes that it's a valuable source of authoritative information on rational prescribing, especially for doctors based in out-stations. Today Sri Lanka Prescriber is among the prestigious drug bulletins

of the world having won the membership of International Society for Drug Bulletins. Prof. Colvin Goonaratna continues his contribution to the field of medicine currently as the Registrar of the Ceylon Medical Council.

A doctor's quest for justice

He authored the book 'A doctor's quest for justice', a highly regarded publication in the field of medical litigation. "I wrote it despite the risk of being confronted with allegations of 'contempt of court'. It was a challenge." His work would bring to light the various legal aspects of medical negligence. He recollects the hardships he went through in getting his work published as a book but ultimately succeeded when he requested the then Chief Justice to write a forward to the book. According to Prof. Goonaratna doctors in Sri Lanka are well protected in the legal context as the current law is in favour of doctors unlike in countries such as the USA and Australia where strict action is taken against doctors. He stresses the importance of proper communication and documentation, especially the daily states of patients. A long list of investigations and medications will not deliver doctors from being negligent, states Prof. Goonaratna.

"I like language" says the renowned author and editor, when questioned about what motivated him to take up medical writing. His passion for medical writing has not only resulted in many books and journals but also in many workshops where he has striven towards enhancing writing skills among students of science.

He continues to write a medical column for a national newspaper. He states that not only was it useful for the patients who wrote to him but it turned out to be a learning opportunity for him as well. "It is only when people ask questions that you come to think about certain topics, some even minute in nature." Today he has initiated a new venture by writing a book on Geriatrics, a field which he believes will be a very important one in the future due to an aging population.

A few tips of the trade

Prof. Goonaratna is of the view that medical research needs a 'jump start'. "Research should be based on a strong hypothesis that will answer a specific, well defined question" says the beloved teacher and mentor of many of the current medical researchers. He goes on to say that "you should start by stating your research question in 25-30 words. If you are unable to do that you are not clear in your mind." Commenting on funds available for research he is of the strong view that the more research you do more you will receive; it is a self perpetuating cycle. He advises that as a doctor one should devote time for teaching and research while ample time should be spent on building up clinical acumen. "We should build up a critical mass of scientists and they should explore deeper in to topics. We must at least increase the research output of this country by 25%."

"Poor knowledge in English also contributes to discourage the conduct and presentation of research", so believes Prof. Goonaratna. To overcome these barriers he gives budding researchers and students the following advice; allocating at least one hour per day to read a good medical journal, attending workshops conducted to enhance knowledge in research and obtaining advice from people who have excelled in research.

With his experience as editor of the CMJ for more than 25 years, he considers medical writing as a difficult skill to develop but not an impossible one.

Hoping that he can pass on the torch to at least a few interested and dedicated individuals in the next generation, he recommends laying the foundation in this pursuit by writing a letter to the editor or a brief report. "One hardly comes across a pleasure greater than seeing one's article being published in a well reputed journal". Although there are so many obstacles on the way he insists that we should commence on this rewarding journey today.

However great a man's natural talent may be, the act of writing cannot be learned all at once

Jean Jacques Rousseau
Swiss philosopher (1712-1778)