

Goodbye! Dear Sir - Dr T Varagunam Former Professor, Department of Medicine, Peradeniya

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Varagunam

Dr T Varagunam , the first academic staff member appointed to the Department of Medicine of the then newly established second medical school at Peradeniya, bid farewell to all his friends and loved ones this week after a long, illustrious and colourful life.

He was given the task of establishing the Department of Medicine in 1964 at the Peradeniya Medical School, as its first academic staff member by then Vice Chancellor, Sir Nicholas Attygalle.

It was a bright evening in early March 1964, when young Varagunam met his old school Dean, now Vice Chancellor of the University of Peradeniya, at the Vice Chancellor's lodge to discuss about the Department of Medicine. At that meeting he was given full assurance by the Vice Chancellor that all help needed would be on his way in establishing the new Department of Medicine at Peradeniya. He left the lodge in high spirits, determined to establish a good department to train the students of the new school in Clinical Medicine.

From 1964 until his departure from this world, a few days ago, he never lost his bond, interest and enthusiasm about the department, for which he sweated and developed from scratch. During the period he served the Department as a Senior Lecturer, and then the second Professor of Medicine from 1964 to 1981, he bonded all academic and non-academic staff members together as a close knit family to work for the betterment of the department. He was a very popular teacher who won the hearts of all pioneering batches of students at Peradeniya. He was instrumental in establishing the ward laboratory at the professorial medical units. He also was a pioneering member in establishing the first Medical Education Unit (MEU) in Sri Lanka, at Peradeniya, with the first Dean of the Faculty, Prof Senaka Bibile.

He leaves his legacy behind by establishing the second Medical Association in Sri Lanka in 1964, (after the Sri Lanka Medical Association), the 'Kandy Society of Medicine (KSM)' with two of his contemporaries working at the General Hospital, Kandy as consultants; namely Dr Kolith karunaratne (a physician) and Dr. M. R Rasaratnam (a surgeon). The Kandy Society of Medicine filled the needs of an active clinical society of the newly established faculty. He further contributed by establishing the 'Kandy Society of Medicine - Health Research Prize', which is considered one of the most valuable prizes awarded to high calibre researchers for their lifetime work in health related research.

Before leaving the Faculty in 1980, he supervised the shifting of the Professorial Medical Units from the General Hospital, Kandy, to the newly established Teaching Hospital, Peradeniya. In late 1980 he left the Faculty to join the World Health Organization, Head Quarter in Geneva, to be in charge of research training in the newly developed programme for research in tropical diseases.

Though he left the faculty, he continued to get involved in the Departmental affairs, and as soon as he retired from the WHO he returned to Kandy and offered his voluntary services to the Department, its staff and the students, and to the Kandy Society of Medicine. He was later appointed Chancellor of the Eastern University of Sri Lanka, to which too he dedicated his fullest assistance in its formative years.

When the two pioneering batches, together with other early batches of students decided to form a past students' association, Dr Varagunam was a pillar of strength, giving them all the assistance and encouragement. This effort culminated in 1992 as PeMSAA (Peradeniya Medical School Alumni Association) - first Medical Alumni Association in Sri Lanka.

Considering all his humanitarian work over many decades to enrich the medical profession and specially the field of Internal Medicine, the Sri Lanka Society of Internal Medicine(SLSIM) , bestowed on him its first oration, in 2017 " T Varagunam oration", which was delivered by a brilliant alumnus of his time from Peradeniya , Prof Shanthi Mendis , a former Professor in Medicine at Peradeniya, and now a world-renowned WHO consultant. This oration created history in the medical field in Sri Lanka as the first oration to be delivered while the namesake was still alive and present in the audience.

Dear Sir , not only have you created a solid foundation, time to time you showered your loving kind attention over all of us; all categories of staff and students, and have always been in the forefront of the well wishers of the Department of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Kandy Society of Medicine and the Peradeniya Medical School Alumni Association .

This note is to tell you that we all, the alumni of Peradeniya Medical School, love you and carry forward the legacy you established at the Department of Medicine to produce humane doctors to the world .

Thank you for everything!

PROF CHANDRIKA JAYASINGHE

Professor in Medicine, Peradeniya