

## Tribute: Prof. T. Varagunam

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By Dr Upul Wijayawardhana

The news that yet another guiding-light of my professional career was extinguished saddened me immensely and took me by surprise. Known to his friends as 'Muggy', Prof Varagunam, a 'giant' of the Peradeniya Medical School, a 'pillar' of the Kandy Society of Medicine and the 'originator' of changes in medical education in Sri Lanka, breathed his last on the day the country celebrated the 70th anniversary of independence. Though I knew he had medical problems due to advancing years, my surprise was due to the promptness with which he responded to the New Year wishes I sent him. While reciprocating and inviting us to have a meal with them, on our next visit to Kandy, he reminded me that he filmed our wedding. There was no need of reminding, as I well remember how he filmed with his 8mm camera; a rarity all those years ago when there were no video cameras or professional videographers.

Not having any medical connections, in spite of a burning desire to achieve something in medicine, I had no guidance for post-graduate training following the successful completion of undergraduate medical studies. As a 'shot in the dark', I sat for the M D (Doctorate of Medicine) examination in December 1966, totally unprepared. Though unsuccessful, it was the turning point in my career, as Prof Ajwad Macan Markar, the first professor of medicine at Peradeniya University who was an

examiner, spotted the 'promise' in me and offered a position in his department. On secondment from the Health Ministry, in June 1967 when I went to Kandy as his registrar, by another stroke of luck, I was assigned to work with Dr Varagunam, who was the senior lecturer in medicine then. Both of them inspired me and taught me so that I could get my M D in December 1967; the first step in my post-graduate career.

When the ministry tried to recall me after just seven months, though I was released for two years, Prof Macan Markar and Dr Varagunam wanted to keep me and Dr J B Pieris, who was also in similar circumstances, long term. They advertised for two lecturers but the selection board selected two senior lecturers, on political recommendations, but it is another story. It was after this that I applied for the post of registrar in the Cardiac Catheterisation Unit in General Hospital Colombo and met another guiding light, Dr N J Walloppillai, in June 1968.

When I was in the UK, on a departmental scholarship, working for the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians in 1969/70, Dr Varagunam, who was now professor in medicine after the retirement of Prof Macan Marker, sent a message that one of the senior lecturers had left and the post would be advertised. I applied and was selected, in spite of being not able to attend the interview. On return to Sri Lanka, I was in for a rude shock as the Director of Health Services refused to release me. Prof Varagunam tried his level best to get me released and kept the post open for two years, an act of kindness I shall never forget. When all efforts failed, I was forced to give up the academic career I was hoping for and opted to give up the Visiting Physician post I held in Badulla General Hospital, to join as the registrar to Dr Walloppillai, who was now the Cardiologist in General Hospital in Colombo.

I described these, in detail, simply to illustrate the greatness of the character of Prof Varagunam. However, my first meeting with him was long before this, as a final year medical student in 1963. He had just returned from the UK, after post-graduate qualifications and was a resident physician in General Hospital Colombo. His enthusiasm for teaching won the hearts of all medical students and in no time became our favourite teacher. We came to know that he hailed from a rich family in Batticaloa that owned acres and acres of paddy land and wondered why he wanted to work but were glad that he did so, because we had a friendly teacher to help us through the last lap of our training.

Prof Varagunam was a proud Royalist and he had reasons to be. He excelled in sports too, in Royal College, being the hooker of the rugby team that won the Bradby shield for the first time in 1948. He was the first Sri Lankan to study medical education, which he did in Illinois University in the USA, after post-graduate qualifications in the UK. This experience no doubt motivated him to achieve another first; setting up of the Medical Education Unit in Peradeniya, which changed the way medicine is taught in Sri Lanka. He had a stint with the WHO, working in Geneva, furthering medical education.

He wanted objectivity to replace subjectivity in education and examinations. I have watched him examine students and his method was the one that all examiners should have followed. He veered the students away from 'Disapamok' system in place, where we just repeated what the professor said

without question. He encouraged questioning thus exposing originality. He was of the firm view that due to the explosion of research, our practice will change from intuitive to analytical.

Though he spent most of his life in Colombo and Kandy, Prof Varagunam never forgot his birthplace, which he was determined to serve. He was the Chancellor of the Eastern University but was not so only in name. Unlike many Chancellors, who consider the position to be a simple honour, he got actively involved in development of the University and gave up the position only when he found travelling to be too onerous. He was instrumental in setting up the Faculty of Health Care Sciences in Eastern University that offers medical degrees (MBBS) as well as nursing degrees (B Sc)

Prof Varagunam will be missed not only by his wife, daughters and their families but also by thousands of patients who got care of exceptional quality, and his students, spread across the world, who were fortunate enough to be associated with a great teacher and even a greater human being.