

Professor Thambipillai Varagunam

The Dean, Faculty of Medicine,
Dear Faculty Board Members.

I consider this a great privilege and honour indeed and also my melancholy duty as the current Head of the Medical Education Unit and as a 2nd generation Medical Educator to present a brief tribute to Professor T. Varagunam who went to his eternal rest on the 70th independence day of the country. I shall confine my short account only to his long lasting contribution to the Medical Education Unit and Medical Education discipline at large.

I had to look into the past history of the Medical Education Unit to write a formal eulogy on this colossal academic who had a conspicuous place in the Medical Education world.

As you all know the Medical Education Unit was the brainchild of Professor Senaka Bibile, the foundation Dean of Peradeniya Medical School. His eyes were on this dynamic young physician who came to Peradeniya from Colombo to be in-charge of the Department of Medicine in the second medical school. He had been greatly inspired by the activities of the "Working Group of Medical Education" formed by Professor Bibile in the mid-sixties.

Dr. Varagunam acceded to the request of the Dean to take up the challenge and go to USA to embark on a new venture i.e. to study medical education in the year 1970. Upon returning from his trailblazer adventure at University of Illinois, Chicago, the pioneering and a marvelous place for Medical Education with a Master's Degree, he opened new innumerable vistas to the inquiring minds of the teachers, students, academics of other disciplines, and gave fantastic glimpses of new horizons. He was entrusted initially to introduce the new Medical Education discipline to the Faculty of Medicine, Peradeniya.

He attended to the formalities of establishing the MEU and Professor Bibile's dream became a reality in January 1973, which was also Dr. Varagunam's watershed moment in his career. In passing, I wish to mention that Professor Pep Jayasena facilitated the process in Colombo as the Registrar to all University Campuses. This was even before the enactment of the present Universities Act.

Dr. Varagunam went into action immediately after establishing the Unit. He organized a series of training workshops to train teachers of health personnel in Educational Process to include broad topic areas such as objectives, teaching methods, curriculum development, assessment of students, evaluation, educational change etc. Initially he conducted educational technology workshops of two weeks duration.

His conscience and concerns centred around teaching and learning in medical school, clinical teaching, objective assessment of medical students, staff development, active and independent learning of students, development of learning resources for students etc. At the same time he was a great promoter of educational research.

Owing to Prof. Varagunam's pioneering efforts, the WHO precipitately recognized the MEU as one Regional Teacher Training Centre for the South East Asia Region and the teachers of health professions education from the regional countries were sent for short term training programmes. This centre at that time was recognized as one of the six Regional Teacher Training Centres (RTTCs) for Health Personnel Education in the World.

In addition to conducting training programmes, this champion Medical Educator undertook projects such as Assistant Medical Practitioners' Training Programme, Compilation of Common Order of Merit for newly passed out graduates of the two existing medical schools, time and motion study of medical internship, Cell Biology course for pre-clinical students. He introduced group dynamics and microteaching to improve the skills of the faculty teachers. He also obtained clinical training co-ordination to MEU with a view to streamline the hospital clerkship programmes and to give logistic support to clinical teachers. He was instrumental in developing an integrated curriculum for assistant medical practitioner students and the training course stunningly succeeded by producing competent Medical Assistants.

At the very beginning he secured the services of two permanent academic staff members and provided opportunities for them to obtain postgraduate qualifications and engaged them in training activities. In addition to trained academic and non academic staff in the MEU, he opened the portals of the Unit for other interested staff to join the resource pool and provided them training in different areas of Medical Education leading to forming a spirited group called "Staff Associates" who later became intangible assets to the Medical Education Unit. Regular training workshops were conducted to teachers of health personnel from Medical, Dental, Veterinary and Allied Health Schools. With a view to improve clinical teaching, he extended training to hospital clinical teachers in the MEU. He went to the extent of inviting teachers from Faculties of Science and Engineering to undergo training programmes especially designed for them. We had senior academics from the Engineering Faculty and Department of Education serving as Staff Associates for a long period of time.

He obtained WHO support for training academics who were interested in Medical Education and also funds for the physical development of the Unit. WHO Fellows who came from countries such as India, Balgladesh, Mianmar, Nepal, The Maldives etc.

attended the short term training programmes conducted by the MEU and these placements by the WHO brought in a considerable sum of money to the University as tuition fees.

He had a penchant for newer technology and strongly advocated the necessity to develop appropriate and innovative learning resources to facilitate student learning using available technology.

He had the privilege of attending the First ever World Conference in Medical Education, which was held in Copenhagen, Denmark.

A personality who was always ahead of the times was never shaken and faced anything with equanimity. He was a gentle and veritable giant to his colleagues, subordinates and students and with his passing we have lost a legendary academic who was also considered a genius in many quarters. Prof. Varagunam lived a full and fruitful life, and left a long lasting legacy.

Sir, the Medical Education Unit certainly owes a mighty debt to your contribution to the discipline of Medical Education and I trust, your family members can cope up with the loss and finally, we convey our deepest condolences to Madam Thayalam Varagunam and your beloved daughters Mira, Radha, and Sita and their families.

Professor Kosala Marambe,
Head/MEU.