

A salute to you Sir, on behalf of many generations of Medical students  
DR .T. VARGUNAM

The passing away of a veritable colossus in every sense of the word, on Sunday, February 4, brought a sadness to us, his former students, that defies description. A former Professor of Medicine, who together with the likes of Senaka Bibile, he helped to pioneer the fledgling Medical School at Peradeniya to the enviable position it now enjoys. He would have in life, wished no public accolade, that was his nature. He was the Chancellor of the Eastern University, a post he carried with aplomb, grace, dignity and ease, a panache, that seemed almost a birthright.

We were from the first batch of medical students at Peradeniya. A motley crowd from various parts of the country, were taught our basics in Medicine by this teacher who was of a new breed, with a conversance of the scientific background to what he was teaching. We lapped up the “pearls of wisdom he cast”, for they were clear expositions of a complex subject. His encouragement in sorting out any puzzlement with focused questions remains even today, the hallmark of this faculty in the hills.

Always a pioneer, he together with a physician friend Dr. Kolitha Karunaratne and the surgeon Rudra Rasaretnam were responsible for the organisation of the Kandy Society of Medicine, one of the foremost medical organisations in the country. With its scientific programmes it remains a vibrant source of continued medical education to the medical community, doctors and students, in the central regions of this country.

His nonchalant demeanour hid an extremely positive nature and we all got used to his “I say, you guys ...” (succinct words of advice or exhortation followed) that marked our relationship with him. Never a person to mince words, but always careful as to their choice, not to hurt a soul, he was a free spirit, though heavy with the garb of responsibility. He was a role model to us youngsters then. He always carried the wisdom that we all ‘will one by one, back in the closet lay’. One of the wisest men I have known.

He was responsible for the initiation of the WHO sponsored, unit on medical education for the South Asian region in the Faculty of Medicine Peradeniya, and for a time was its very active head, a role he undertook with all his onerous duties. A stint at the WHO in Geneva followed some years later.

A keen sportsman, the hooker in Ashley Cader’s 1st Bradby Shield winning team in 1948, he kept his interest in rugger, even turning up for practices for the Kandy team, while a Senior Lecturer teaching us. A regular participant at all the scientific meetings until a few months ago, we were accustomed to his penetrating questions.

In the later years he bore his illness with the stoic attitude we were accustomed to expect from him. He leaves his wife Thayalam, three daughters and grandchildren.

We salute you, Sir, for having inspired so many generations of medical students. May the turf rest softly.

Dr. Channa Ratnatunga