

**PROF. C C BALASUBRAMANIAM – a gentle healer *par excellence***

Professor C C Balasubramaniam, Founder Professor of Pathology of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Jaffna and later, Professor of Pathology, North Colombo Medical College, passed away peacefully on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2008, after serving his country with quiet dedication and guiding generations of medical students in Jaffna, Peradeniya and North Colombo.

He leaves behind his devoted and gentle wife Kausa, his only daughter Darshi and beloved granddaughters Meera and Neeraja (Gigi).

Prof. Bala, born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1918, was the son of Mudaliyar Chelliah and Ponnammah Chelliah of Chundikuli, Jaffna. Being the youngest in a family of four male siblings he was the centre of attraction and the principal beneficiary of family love and affection. After his primary and secondary education at St. Patrick's College, Jaffna, he gained admission to St. Joseph's College, Colombo, to study for university entrance.

In pursuit of Mudaliyar Chelliah's dream of making his youngest son shine as a brilliant lawyer, young Bala was reluctantly persuaded to gain admission to the Ceylon Law College to become a proctor. Bala however had other ideas kindled by his love for medicine and a desire to emulate his grandfather's vocation in life. His conflict became compulsive enough to make him stand up to his father and say good bye to a carrier in law and embark on his cherished career in medicine.

After graduating as a doctor in 1948 with honours, Bala's early carrier was nourished and nurtured by the guidance of such eminent members of the profession at the time as Dr. Wijerama and Professor Milroy Paul. Later he was posted to the provinces where his services were rendered to rural Ceylon.

In 1955 he proceeded to the United Kingdom to pursue post-graduate studies in pathology and clinical medicine and, in due course, succeeded in getting memberships of both the Royal

Colleges of Pathologists as well as the Royal College of Medicine. Few years later, he was elected a Fellow of both these Colleges. In recognition of the services he had rendered in these fields, the Ceylon College of Physicians also conferred the honour by electing him a Fellow of that College.

His qualifications and training in medicine and pathology made him a highly respected clinical pathologist; during his long tenure as Consultant Pathologist at the Kandy General Hospital he was affectionately referred to by his colleagues as the 'walking encyclopaedia of medicine'.

After a short stint as Consultant Pathologist at Prince Charles Hospital in Wales, UK, he was appointed the Founder Professor of Pathology in the Faculty of Medicine, Jaffna. Being a devoted son of the soil, he put his heart and soul to found and develop the department of pathology. The pathology museum he established, which is still being used for teaching and examinations, is testimony to his relentless dedication to the cause of pathology education.

In 1990 when he left his Nallur Road residence for his daughter's confinement in Colombo, little did he realise that he had said goodbye to Jaffna. The escalation of the ethnic conflict was to isolate him from his own native surroundings. Years later he was to tell me that shortly after he had left his Jaffna home the 'boys' had robbed him of all his belongings leaving behind only the shell of his house—the dispossession of his library which he had lovingly collected over the years added to the intensity of his poignancy.

When I first met Prof Bala in 1991 he had reached the sunset of his professional and academic life. By then he was physically wracked by years of diabetes and emotionally devastated by the personal tragedy that had befallen his only daughter; for him, the devouring flames of ethnic violence that had engulfed the country were beyond comprehension.

It was at such a juncture that I was selected by Prof Bala as a temporary lecturer in his department. The physical and emotional traumas didn't dampen his attitude to help me professionally. I was then a fresh graduate considering pathology and paediatrics as possible future career paths. He allowed me to conduct most of the teaching, reporting of specimens, performing post mortems, and conducting clinico-pathological meetings—he virtually pushed me into the deep waters of pathology! His intention was to make it easy for me to make up my mind one way or the other—which is exactly what I did at the end of my attachment with the department. At the end of 9 months when I was leaving for my internship, Prof. suggested that I return to the department and start training in earnest under his guidance. After completing my internship and a further 10 months in Anuradhapura I decided to return to Prof Bala's department. The sound foundation I received there helped me so immensely in my post-graduate training that I am ever indebted to this wonderful man.

Although Prof. was a quiet and contemplative person brilliant in his academic and professional stature, the conversations we had while travelling between Colombo and Ragama gave me insights into his broader character and interests.

His eyes sparkled when he walked down memory lane and recalled his childhood in Chundikuli when he had to stand up to his father on career changes. He told me how as a young medical student he used to cycle with his friend Mackie Ratwatte to a stately home down Rosmead Place where a youthful and radiant Sirimavo treated them to tiffin while a thoughtful SWRD would pace the colonnaded veranda puffing at his pipe.

He had an impish sense of humour and a twinkle in his otherwise mournful eyes when he related the pranks they played on the handful of female medical students who had dared to invade a male-dominated profession at the time. Prof was an avid reader with wide interests in the arts and literature; he would quote the Bhagavad Gita or Shakespeare with equal ease.

He had bitter memories of the terrible carnage inflicted by the “IPKF Saviours” recalling how they ran amok in the Jaffna hospital killing doctors, nurses, patients and bystanders. He was a helpless witness to this orgy of killing during the last months of 1987 following the Indo-Lanka accord.

During my contacts with him I found that his two granddaughters Meera and Gigi were very much a part of his mental preoccupation and concern. He wanted to secure their future through a good education. Prof. was fortunate to see this dream come true when Meera graduated as a doctor and little Gigi entered medical school. With his last wish thus fulfilled, I am certain Prof. Balasubramaniam was ready to meet his Maker in peace and contentment. I pray for his soul to be with God.

T Rodrigo

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