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Editorial

The late Dr. W D H Perera – and the advancement of dermatology as a specialty in Sri Lanka

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2009 was a sad year for dermatology in Sri Lanka. Dr. W D H Perera, a leading dermatologist, passed away after a brief illness. He left a legacy of probably the single largest contribution to dermatology as a specialty in Sri Lanka. The hiatus to us in dermatology has been vast, since we lost a brilliant colleague, a dear friend, and above all a person who set high standards, in academic excellence and in moral and ethical principles.

A specialty is set up in a developing country such as ours, when the area of expertise in medicine is recognized as a special area of care. It develops when those entrusted with the care of patients in the special area, do so with, adequate care of patients with diseases in that field, with academic and ethical excellence. It also needs the care and willingness to train others in the field.

To develop the specialty further it requires a grouping of those involved to discuss and exchange information and views, to learn more from those in the country and outside. It needs a basis for training other doctors in that field, to inculcate in them values of academic excellence, in ethical care of their patients and to train them in research methodology to fill gaps in knowledge, and to refine their skills. The need for contact with others in the field in the adjoining countries and in those countries with more developed techniques and knowledge are other areas for further development.

Dermatology was recognized as a speciality in Sri Lanka in 1954. Dr. W D H Perera belonged to the third generation of dermatologists in Sri Lanka¹. The first two generations established dermatology as a speciality in Colombo and later Kandy and Galle. Those training under them were sent for training in dermatology to the UK and then established themselves as dermatologists in the country. It is to the credit of the second generation of dermatologists, Drs Ratnaike, Gunawardena, Abeywickrema and Ranasingha, that dermatology became a recognized academic and scientific discipline.

Much more needed to be done to advance dermatology in Sri Lanka. In the 1970's there were dermatologists in Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Badulla,

Jaffna, Kurunegala and Ratnapura. The need to form an academic association to bring these dermatologists together with a few functioning in the private sector was the brainchild of the late Dr. W D H Perera². The idea was mooted by him in 1982, but it was in October 1985, that he managed to get all together and have the inaugural general meeting of the Sri Lanka Association of Dermatologists (SLAD). This was a giant step in dermatology in Sri Lanka. Though the major part of the work in forming the association was his, it was in the nature of Dr. W D H Perera that he insisted that he only be the assistant secretary and treasurer of the association. The association flourished, under the subtle direction of Dr. W D H Perera. There were regular annual academic sessions and regional clinical meetings in dermatology departments, in Colombo and more so in the departments of dermatology outside Colombo. The association met often to review topics in dermatology of current and local interest. The SLAD was officially converted to a College (SLCD) in 2005. Blue and gold were chosen as the College colours by Dr. W D H Perera².

Another milestone of the association was the 1st annual academic sessions held on a grand scale as a joint meeting with the German Dermatological Society (DDG) with the participation of the president of the DDG, Prof Enno Cristophers and many eminent dermatologists from Germany². Here too it was Dr. W D H Perera who was mainly instrumental in setting up this event, through the efforts of his friend Dr. Gunter Schwenzer, an eminent dermatological Surgeon. Dr. Gunter Schwenzer was also a key figure in the formation of the SLAD, and was an invited guest at its inaugural meeting.

The close friendship of the late Dr. W D H Perera and the late Dr. Gunter Schwenzer, and their untiring efforts, resulted in a strong bond between the SLAD and the DDG. A memorandum of understanding was established with the DDG. Four joint meetings between the two associations were held in Sri Lanka in 1986, 1998, 2002 and 2005 and a delegation of our members participated in the DDG annual sessions held in April 2007, with Dr. W D H Perera leading the team³.

Steps were taken for the SLAD to be an active partner in the International League of Dermatological Societies, again with the leadership of Dr. W D H Perera. The memorandum of understanding with the DDG was the first of such ventures which was followed by an example to set up a similar agreement with the Dermatology Society of Singapore, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Prasad Kumarasinghe. The visit of the Dowling Club of England with over 40

participants from there, was another major event, this through the efforts of Dr. Ganga Sirimanne.

The next major step in international cooperation was the establishment of the South Asian Regional Association of Dermatologists, Venereologists and Leprologists. Dr. W D H Perera and a group of enthusiastic senior dermatologists from South Asia pioneered the formation of this organization, the SARAD. The main aims of this association were to advance the knowledge and practice of dermatology in the region and to help improve the management of skin diseases of the people of this region. Dr. W D H Perera was given the onerous task of formulating the constitution of the Association. This constitution, adopted by the general body of SARAD, was a very competent and satisfactory one. The SARAD continues its work to date, under the same constitution, with no amendments. He was an active and much respected figure of the SARAD, and was posthumously awarded the lifetime achievement award for his unlimited contributions to the field of dermatology in Sri Lanka and South Asia at the 6th SAARC conference held in Nepal in 2009. Sri Lanka hosted the 3rd SAARC conference in 2003. Dr. W D H Perera was a key figure in its organization, and in no small measure helped make it one of the best conferences held by SARAD.

The need for training dermatologists was felt by us dermatologists, at least the few in active practice, the Department of Health and the public at large. The Postgraduate Institute of Medicine (PGIM) was re-setup in 1979. This institute, which was from then responsible for post graduate education in medicine in Sri Lanka, established boards of study in the various fields in medicine to guide and control education and specialization in that field. Dermatology was included in the Board of Study in Medicine. Those opting to train in dermatology did so after completion of the MD in general medicine, by having an in service period of training in recognized departments of dermatology in Sri Lanka and abroad.

This, however, left a lot to be desired as dermatologists were not involved in decision making regarding the training in dermatology. Dr. W D H Perera spearheaded the formation of a separate board of study in dermatology, through a resolution in the SLAD in 1992. It was through a long and persistent effort by Dr. W D H Perera, with the help of Dr. (Mrs) K H Weerasekera that this succeeded and the first meeting of the Board of Study in Dermatology was held in December 1994⁴. This Board formulated a structured training programme for those completing the MD (Medicine) and opting for dermatology as a career. However, this programme attracted only 4 trainees who opted for a career in dermatology, over a 3 year period.

It was at this time that the Board of Study in Dermatology under the leadership of Dr. W D H Perera, formulated the programme in dermatology where those candidates desirous of training in dermatology as a specialized career, were selected through a selection test in basic dermatology and medicine. Those selected were allocated to the recognized departments of dermatology in Sri Lanka and were made to undergo a very well organized training programme, both in dermatology and general medicine. They were tested in both dermatology and general medicine and once successful were awarded the MD in Dermatology. A research component and a period of post MD training in dermatology were included in the programme. This was a radical shift. Dr. W D H Perera was conscious of this and it was in his nature that he wrote an editorial in the SLAD journal questioning the future of this programme⁵

There is now, no doubt about the quality of this programme. This has created competent and successful dermatologists distributed in main hospitals in all parts of the country. These dermatologists have followed Dr. W D H and established new links with the world of dermatology. Some have engaged in good research that has added much to the practice of dermatology. The total commitment of Dr. W D H Perera and the other dermatologists at that time, for the successful training and examining of the selected candidates, was largely responsible for this. Dr. W D H Perera was instrumental again through the DDG in obtaining the services of a visiting professor from Germany, for a month each year, to give an international exposure to the trainees.

Dr. W D H Perera did not end his services to dermatology even after his retirement from the Department of Health. This remarkable achievement, had never before been encountered in the Universities of Sri Lanka. This was the arrangement of a trilateral agreement between the DDG, the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the University of Sri Jayawardenapura,

and the SLCD, for the establishment of an endowment chair in dermatology, funded by the DDG. This was the first academic chair in dermatology in a University in Sri Lanka. This was established in February 2007.

He thus achieved, in a lifetime, all the goals necessary to bring dermatology to the forefront of medicine in Sri Lanka. He established a very vibrant SLCD. He established lasting links with the international community in dermatology, first with Germany, then with the International League of Dermatological Societies and finally with the dermatological societies and dermatologists in the region, through SARAD. He established a remarkably effective post graduate programme in dermatology, and helped establish the first academic chair in dermatology.

The contribution of the late Dr. W D H Perera to dermatology cannot be recounted only in the numerous achievements he initiated. He was a leader. He taught by example the necessity of detail, compassion and ethical considerations in dealing with patients with skin diseases.

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