



Honouring Dr. Joe Fernando A Legendary Leader in Medical Administration

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Dr. Joe Fernando's life and career exemplify the spirit of service, integrity, and visionary leadership in medical administration. This appreciation honours his enduring contributions to Sri Lanka's healthcare system and inspires all those dedicated to public health and medical administration.

Early Life and Family Roots

Dr. Joe Fernando was born in 1931 in the scenic town of Marawila, Sri Lanka. Raised in a family deeply connected to the local community, his father was both a lawyer and a landowner. Growing up amid the lush coconut estates of Marawila and Chilaw, Dr. Fernando developed a deep appreciation for his homeland and a strong sense of family unity. These values continued to shape his life, as he maintained close relationships with his relatives and emphasised serving the community.

Educational Journey

Dr. Fernando began his education at a Sinhala school in Marawila, establishing a solid foundation for his future. He then attended St. Mary's College in Chilaw at the age of eight and later moved to St. Benedict's College in Colombo as a boarder at the age of twelve. These formative educational experiences not only broadened his knowledge but also instilled in him camaraderie, resilience, and a commitment to serving others—qualities that guided him throughout his life.

Medical Training in Ireland

In 1952, at age 21, Dr. Fernando continued his family's tradition by travelling to Dublin, Ireland, to study medicine, following in his father's footsteps from 1917. The journey, a four-day flight with several stops, marked the beginning of a significant chapter. He excelled both academically and culturally during his nine years in Dublin, including his time working as a Medical Officer after graduation. Ireland held a special place in his heart, and he often expressed his fondness for the country and its people. The song "Galway Bay" became symbolic of his affection for Ireland, the Emerald Isle, and he cherished family gatherings where the song was played or sung, making it a memorable part of his life's story.



Return to Sri Lanka and Early Career

Upon returning to Sri Lanka, Dr. Fernando experienced a homecoming and a new set of challenges. His first position as Medical Officer at Gokerala Peripheral Hospital exposed him to the basic healthcare facilities available to the community, a stark contrast to the advanced systems he had seen in Ireland. This experience strengthened his resolve to improve healthcare standards in Sri Lanka.

He was subsequently transferred to Kurunegala, where he served in the Outpatient Department (OPD). During this time, he met Dr. Mahalakshmi Nagasunderam, another healthcare professional equally committed to medicine. Their shared dedication to patient care and community health laid the foundation for their relationship. Together, they raised three children: their eldest daughter, Dr. Angela de Silva, who serves as Regional Advisor at SEARO, WHO; their second daughter, Ramani Hapugalla, an accountant; and their son, Patrick Fernando, who is both a Senior instructor Pilot and Chief Technical Officer at Sri Lankan Airlines.

As Dr. Fernando's career progressed, he assumed more prominent roles, including District Medical Officer (DMO) in Gampola and positions in Kuliyaipitiya and Chilaw. While working in Chilaw, he travelled to the United Kingdom, where he earned a Diploma in Public Health from the University of Liverpool. This step demonstrated his commitment to enhancing healthcare quality for the communities he served.

Distinguished Service and National Impact

After returning from the United Kingdom, Dr. Fernando was appointed to the Institute of Hygiene in Kalutara, which is now known as the National Institute of Health Sciences. He then served as Medical Superintendent in Badulla for four years, and his career continued to flourish with positions such as Superintendent of Health Services in Galle, Director of the National Hospital of Sri Lanka, and roles within the Ministry of Health. Ultimately, he rose to become Director General of Health Services and Secretary of Health. Dr. Fernando was a visionary leader whose integrity and compassion inspired many in the field of public health and medical administration.

Championing Maternal and Child Health

Dr. Fernando made significant contributions to reducing maternal and infant mortality in Sri Lanka. Through strategic initiatives and persistent advocacy, he played a vital role in advancing maternal health and child welfare, making profound strides in improving public health outcomes. His legacy is seen in the healthier futures and lives saved across the country.

Dedication for provision of curative care services

While serving as Director General of Health Services and later as Secretary of Health, he took it upon himself to closely oversee the delivery of curative services nationwide to maintain continuous care. Thanks to his dedication, all essential medical services were consistently provided in the Northern and Eastern provinces, even amidst civil unrest.

Dr. Fernando's Contribution to Maravilla Hospital

Dr. Fernando played a pivotal role in transforming Maravilla Hospital, working tirelessly to elevate it to the status of a Base Hospital. This achievement was driven by his personal dream to provide Secondary care services to the community in his native town.

Dr. Fernando frequently reflected on his childhood experiences, recalling visits to Maravilla Hospital with his father whenever health issues arose. These

memories fueled his passion and commitment to improving the hospital for future generations.

Even after retiring, Dr. Fernando remained dedicated to the hospital's progress. With the support of philanthropic donors, he further enhanced the hospital's status. He took great pride in visiting Maravilla Hospital whenever he returned to his hometown, celebrating the strides the institution had made under his guidance.

Family Values and Personal Principles

Dr. Fernando's devotion to his family was central to his life. He ensured his family accompanied him to every duty station, encouraging them to experience life in various regions of Sri Lanka. His children attended local schools, fostering a strong sense of belonging and appreciation for their cultural heritage.

He was celebrated for his principles regarding patient care, work ethics, and integrity. Dr. Fernando never accepted payments or gifts for his medical services, believing that healthcare was a vocation driven by compassion rather than financial reward. He refrained from using his influence for personal benefit, exemplifying moral character and setting a standard for others. Despite lacking formal leadership or ethics training, he became a respected leader through his example and experience.

Influence and Mentorship

Dr. Fernando's natural leadership style encouraged teamwork and ethical practice among his colleagues. He fostered open communication, empowering peers to share ideas and concerns, thereby strengthening teamwork and improving patient care. He served as both a mentor and a role model, profoundly influencing the professional and personal development of many in the healthcare sector, and became a father figure to those he guided.

Continued Service After Retirement

Following his retirement, Dr. Fernando remained committed to advancing community health initiatives. He dedicated his time to volunteering with organisations focused on public health education, leading free medical camps, and engaging in community discussions regarding preventive healthcare strategies. His enduring legacy is defined by the profound impact he made on individuals and the broader community, rather than by formal titles.

Legacy and Lasting Impact

Dr. Fernando valued family life, celebrated significant milestones, and instilled in his children the principles of diligence, integrity, and empathy. He fostered open communication and provided

guidance characterised by wisdom and composure. Despite facing health challenges later in life, he demonstrated notable resilience, maintaining a positive outlook and sense of humor. Dr. Fernando continued to offer support and inspiration to family and friends, encouraging a perspective that views challenges as opportunities for personal development.

The far-reaching effects of Dr. Fernando's service are reflected in the appreciation expressed by his patients, the young physicians he mentored, and the enhanced well-being of families across Sri Lanka. His substantial contributions are integral to the fabric of the nation's healthcare system and will be recognised for generations to come.

Conclusion:

Dr. Joe Fernando's career exemplifies dedication, integrity, and compassion in healthcare. Through his practice of servant leadership, he motivated others to pursue excellence and to place patient welfare at the forefront of their efforts. His contributions have established a significant legacy, providing enduring inspiration for future generations of healthcare leaders.

As we honour his memory in the Journal of CMASL, though his journey has ended, we reaffirm our commitment to the values he championed: compassion, integrity, and dedication to service. Dr. Fernando's unwavering vision and ethical standards demonstrate how an individual's leadership can impact on the health and welfare of an entire nation.

He passed away on 14th November 2025, following a long and accomplished life spanning more than 90 years.

May he rest in Peace.