

COVER STORY

Reflecting on the Virtues of Legendary Sri Lankan Medical Administrators in Service and in Spirit*Dr. Malinga Fernando Memorial Oration 2025**Dalpatadu KCS¹*¹*Institute for Health Policy*<https://doi.org/10.4038/sljma.v26i2.5596>

Dr. Sudath Dharmaratne – President CMASL, Dr. Anil Jasinghe – Secretary, Ministry of Health and Mass Media, Prof. Mohan De Silva – Emeritus Professor of Surgery, Dr. Sidney Chandrasiri – Chief Executive officer Australian Institute of Health Executives, Members of the Head Table, Past Presidents and Fellows, Members of the College of Medical Administrators of Sri Lanka, family members of Dr. Malinga Fernando, distinguished invitees, ladies and gentlemen:

It is with great honour and profound respect that I stand before you today to deliver the Dr. Malinga Fernando Memorial Oration at the inauguration of the academic sessions of the College of Medical Administration. I consider this a privilege as he has been one of my role models and mentors for over three decades.

On this significant occasion, we gather to pay tribute to the legendary medical administrator, Dr. Sarikkalige Deepal Malinga Fernando, whose remarkable life and career continue to inspire us all.

Early Life and Education

Dr. Malinga Fernando was born to a well-to-do family on October 19, 1929, at "Sri Mahal" in Panadura, as the only child of Sarikkalige David Solomon Fernando and Gertrude Suddrikku Jayawickrema Gunasekera.

From an early age, he demonstrated a sharp intellect and an intense eagerness to learn. He completed his primary and secondary education at Sri Sumangala College, Panadura. It was during his school days that his curiosity and educational excellence became evident, establishing a strong foundation for his future accomplishments.

Academic Pursuits and Ascendancy

In 1949, Dr. Malinga Fernando began his higher education at the Faculty of Science at the University of Ceylon, Colombo. He later graduated from the Colombo Medical Faculty of the University of Ceylon in 1954 with honours. Thereafter, he joined the University of Colombo as a research assistant to the then Professor of Surgery Milroy Paul.

However, choosing a path less travelled, he was among a select group of doctors who decided to pursue a career in medical administration rather than the more highly sought-out clinical specialties. This important decision marked the beginning of a distinguished professional journey, during which he rose to prominent positions within the public health sector.

Dr. Fernando's initial appointment was as DMO

Weligama. Demonstrating exceptional ability, he quickly advanced through the ranks, serving as DMO Panadura, Medical Superintendent of Colombo South Hospital, Superintendent of the Colombo Group of Hospitals, Deputy Director of Health Services, and Director General of Health Services in May 1981. In September 1985, he became Secretary of the Ministry of Health.

After he retired from the Ministry of Health, he was appointed as the Team Leader to a group at the WHO, Geneva to support countries in greatest need. He retired from WHO in April 1996. His tenure at WHO headquarters was marked by both professional fulfilment and personal relaxation, free from the administrative pressures he had previously faced.

Personal Life

Beyond his professional achievements, Dr. Malinga Fernando's personal life reflected his unblemished character and values. He met his life partner, Nandani Chintha Perera, during their medical studies, and they married on February 12, 1959. Together, they raised two daughters: Neluka, now Chair Professor of Microbiology at the Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayawardenapura. The younger daughter Vindya now efficiently oversees the family's business interests.

Professional Excellence

Dr. Malinga Fernando was widely recognised for his exemplary administrative skills and steadfast discipline, both of which significantly enhanced the quality and efficiency of government health services. His influence reached far beyond national borders as he undertook several appointments with the World Health Organisation, including serving on its Executive Board. During his tenure in Geneva, he played a pivotal role in strengthening health systems in some of the world's least developed countries.

He was the first Director General of Health Services and became the first medical administrator from the Department of Health

Services to be appointed as the Secretary of Health.

Legacy and Distinguished Service

Dr. Fernando's legacy in medical administration is unparalleled. As the Secretary of the Ministry of Health, he demonstrated outstanding leadership and vision. Even after he retired from national service, he remained devoted to global health through his work with the WHO in Geneva for six years, and he continued to mentor those who sought his guidance and advice.

Personal Interests and Passing

In addition to his professional pursuits, Dr. Malinga Fernando had a passion for automobiles. He took pride in collecting and maintaining old automobiles and antiques and took pleasure in the finer aspects of life. He often found relaxation at the Nuwara Eliya Hill Club, where he enjoyed both the tranquility of the surroundings and the company of friends.

On January 9, 2008, Dr. Malinga Fernando passed away after a brief illness. He left behind a legacy that continues to inspire those involved in medical administration and public health, and his contributions are highly regarded. May his sojourn in "Sansara" be short and may he attain Nirvana.

President Dr. Sudath Darmaratne,

I would like to reiterate that it is with great honour and privilege that I deliver this oration in memory of the late Dr. Malinga Fernando, a mentor and a role model to me for more than thirty years.

The subject of my address this evening is "Reflecting on the Virtues of Legendary Sri Lankan Medical Administrators in Service and in Spirit."

This oration seeks to recognise the distinctive virtues that define legendary medical administrators in Sri Lanka—those who have served in various settings, curative, preventive, promotive, and rehabilitative sectors of the health services. It also pays tribute to Dr. Malinga Fernando, whose legacy as a legendary medical administrator continues to inspire generations. His career stands as a testament to unwavering commitment to efficient and effective healthcare delivery at the national, provincial, and regional levels, setting a benchmark for excellence in medical administration unique to the Sri Lankan context.

Excellence in Medical Administration

During my induction in 2016 as the President of this esteemed College, I spoke on the topic of "Excellence in Medical Administration" and the difference between being an excellent administrator and merely a good one.

I referenced survey results based on the perceptions of retired medical administrators concerning excellence among their peers, predecessors, and subordinates.

The most admired qualities included charisma, vision, task orientation, and a people-friendly approach. For those who retired before 2000, three names stood out: Dr. Malinga Fernando, Dr. Joe Fernando, and Dr. George Fernando.

Today, I aim to take this discussion a step further by examining the virtues that must be cultivated and demonstrated for one to be remembered as a medical administration legend.

Defining Legendary Virtues in Medical Administration

While it is easy to identify legends in fields such as cricket—where statistics underline greatness, as in the cases of Don Bradman or Sachin Tendulkar—or music, where popularity and album sales highlight stars like Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson, we often overlook how to recognise a legend in Medical Administration. Through my research, I realised that the benchmarks we should seek are the virtues that set these individuals apart from other medical administrators.

Virtue, in its purest sense, represents the moral excellence that guides a leader to act not only with skill, but also with character and compassion. In medical administration, virtue is demonstrated by

- Patience in adversity,
- Courage in advocating for change,
- Modesty in leadership.

As philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote, "Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one."

This is a powerful call to action for all of us as custodians of public health.

Who is a Legendary Medical Administrator?

A legendary medical administrator embodies a consistent pattern of virtues, which includes:

- Innovation and Adaptability
- Compassion and Empathy
- Integrity and Ethics
- Mentorship and Education

Leadership and Vision

At the heart of legendary medical administration lies exceptional leadership. The highest form of leadership goes beyond authority and is rooted in service. Such individuals lead by example, navigating crises, building consensus, and inspiring excellence. Their leadership is marked by

vision, decisiveness, and the courage to challenge the status quo in pursuit of better outcomes for patients and staff.

A legendary medical administrator is a visionary — someone who sees possibilities where others see only obstacles. When faced with daunting challenges, they remind us of the famous quote

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.” and in times of crisis, their calm serves as an example for all.

However, leadership must be paired with a true commitment to collaboration. A genuine legend creates a culture where every voice matters, encouraging open dialogue and empowering others to contribute solutions.

Their faith in collective wisdom turns ordinary meetings into dynamic forums for progress, ensuring that both challenges and successes are shared among colleagues.

“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.” — As philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote.

Embracing Change: The Virtue of Innovation and Adaptability

The pursuit of innovation and adaptability is not a passing trend but a fundamental virtue of effective leadership and administration.

In today’s rapidly evolving healthcare landscape, administrators must foster a forward-thinking mindset to navigate complex environments shaped by technological advancements, shifting regulations, and changing patient expectations.

Legendary medical administrators understand that progress in medicine depends on innovation and adaptability. They

- Support change,
- Pioneer new approaches,
- Introducing groundbreaking technologies,
- Redesign care models,
- Promote interdisciplinary collaboration.

Their dedication to innovation ensured continuous improvement and resilience in health services.

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.” — Charles Darwin.

Readiness for the Unexpected

An adaptive mindset is crucial for preparing organisations to meet unforeseen challenges, such as public health crises and pandemics.

Administrators exemplify adaptability in such moments with a solution-oriented attitude, transforming crises into opportunities for creative problem-solving and growth. Their leadership through uncertainty not only protects patient care but also encourages teams to innovate and overcome obstacles together.

Albert Einstein once remarked, “The measure of intelligence is the ability to change.”

Anecdote: Innovation and Adaptability

Dr. Malinga Fernando, as Secretary to the Ministry of Health, played a pivotal role in establishing the State Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Corporation (SPMC). His vision and adaptability were critical in preparing and securing acceptance of the proposal, which was realised with a grant from the Japanese government in 1987. His leadership ensured the successful implementation of this essential drug-manufacturing entity, fulfilling the dreams of Professor Senaka Bibile and Dr. S. A. Wickramasinghe.

Dr. Fernando’s foresight in recognising the need for local pharmaceutical production, his ability to facilitate international collaboration, and his management of complex logistics exemplify the virtues of a legendary medical administrator. His story emphasises the necessity of innovative thinking and adaptability for lasting impact in healthcare.

Following the launch of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI) in 1978, Dr. Fernando, as Secretary of Health in 1985, personally reviewed the EPI program with all Medical Officers of Health across the country to ensure targets were met.

He held regular reviews, addressed issues directly, and promoted team confidence. His clarity of purpose spurred collective action, turning apprehension into shared success and contributing significantly to the program’s achievements.

This highlights Dr. Malinga’s visionary and innovative approach and demonstrates how he motivated and mobilised MOOHs to contribute toward achieving EPI targets.

As John Quincy Adams 6th President of USA aptly put it, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.”

Dr. Palitha Mahipala, former Secretary of Health, recalls another innovation credited to Dr. Fernando: his vision to reduce maternal mortality in Sri Lanka by improving maternal care through the initiation of institutional reviews of maternal deaths and strengthening health systems for safer, quality care for every pregnant woman.

"I have a strong recollection of my memory in participating in more than four such organised Institutional, District and National reviews with all relevant stakeholders, starting sharp at 8 am ending around 6 pm after going through all the details. I was privileged to witness his focus on the issues and his personal commitment, as he took immediate administrative actions to address those issues highlighted during the review. His wisdom in proposing practical solutions, ability to suggest a scientific way forward, and his close supervision during implementation were remarkable, outstanding and extraordinary".

"As a result, the maternal mortality rate dropped from 60 per 100,000 live births in the 1980s to 40 in 2000, enabling Sri Lanka to achieve the Millennium Development Goal target ahead of schedule—the first country in the region to do so. His visionary and far-sighted leadership, practical wisdom, dedication to work and personnel commitment to monitoring the progress have inspired me so much and helped reshape my medical administrative carrier in later life".

This anecdote demonstrates how a subordinate perceived his leader's innovative and holistic approach, which had made a significant mark in reducing MMR.

Compassion and Empathy

Empathy involves understanding the feelings of another person, while compassion is the desire to help alleviate suffering. Compassion and empathy are essential for strong leadership and effective administration.

Well-known psychologist and author of Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman, explains that compassion begins with full attention—truly seeing the person in front of you. When we see others, empathy arises naturally; if they are in need, empathic concern compels us to act.

Compassionate action begins with this attention.

The greatest administrators never lose sight of the individuals behind the statistics—patients, families, and healthcare workers. Their unwavering commitment to service ensures care remains at the centre of every initiative. Beyond policies and procedures, compassion breathes life into medical administration.

Legendary medical administrators are distinguished by their profound compassion. Staff and patients often recall their open doors and hearts. There are many examples—such as personally visiting a staff member's family in crisis or walking the wards late at night to listen to concerns of staff and patients.

In addition to visible acts of kindness, these

leaders quietly ensure that systems and policies reflect deep respect for both patients and staff. Compassion is woven into every element of their leadership, apparent in daily interactions and broader organisational policies.

During vulnerable moments, true legends offer more than professional guidance—they extend genuine kindness, celebrating personal milestones and grieving losses alongside their teams. This empathetic approach creates a sense of belonging and trust, making their institutions not just workplaces, but communities where every individual feels valued and supported.

As distinguished American author Simon Sinek notes, "Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge."

Anecdotes: Compassion and Empathy

Dr. Susantha De Silva, former Deputy Director General (Planning), shares an incident that highlights Dr. Malinga Fernando's empathy and compassion toward subordinates. While serving as DMO Panadura, Dr. De Silva and his wife faced a major robbery at their home, forcing them to find new housing immediately. Upon hearing of their situation, Dr. Fernando generously offered his own house, where his mother lived, until they could secure a suitable place.

An incident in my career also highlights this virtue in him. Once, I met him to seek a transfer after ten years at the National Institute of Health Sciences (NIHS) where I was working as the Deputy Director of Training. Initially, he expressed reluctance to release me due to organisational needs of NIHS, when I strongly protested, I will be stagnating there; he understood my frustration and ambitions.

"He listened with the seriousness others reserved for speaking." Rather than responding with anger, he took immediate steps to advertise the post of Director of Management Training at MDPU, which he has earlier suppressed. I was selected after an interview enabling me to progress in my career.

"These anecdotes depict how Dr Malinga's compassionate nature and empathetic concerns helped officers in times of need."

Integrity and Ethics

The integrity of medical administrators is the foundation of trust in healthcare delivery. Legendary administrators uphold the highest ethical standards, ensuring that every policy and decision reflects fairness, transparency, and respect for human dignity. Their commitment to ethical conduct serves as a moral compass for institutions and sets a standard for all who follow.

Integrity is the unwavering commitment to do what is right, even when no one is watching. This forms the bedrock of trust between administrators, clinicians, and the communities they serve. When resource allocation raises ethical questions or political pressures threaten decision-making, the leader of integrity stands firm, guided by principle rather than popularity.

“In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock.” — Thomas Jefferson, American Founding Father and the third president of the United States.

Trust is the “glue” that binds leaders, staff and the serving community. Integrity in leadership involves honesty, consistency, reliability, and accountability in all actions and communications, fostering a trustworthy environment.

“In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if they don’t have the first, the other two will kill you.” – Warren Buffett. Famous American investor and philanthropist

Ethics in Decision-Making

Administrators emphasise strong systems, and their commitment to ethical conduct establishes a trustworthy environment for staff and patients. This often means making tough choices aligned with “what is right,” even when not easy. Ethical dilemmas in administration are inevitable—from resource allocation to upholding patient confidentiality in the digital age. Decisions must balance practicality with profound moral responsibility.

The foundation of medical ethics is beneficence and non-maleficence. An administrator’s integrity ensures these principles guide all decisions, from resource allocation to strategic planning. Ethical leadership requires courage to stand up for core values, ensuring ethical standards are upheld throughout the organisation, even when unpopular.

As one colleague recalled, Dr. Malinga Fernando once remarked, “The measure of our profession is not just in the statistics of survival, but in the dignity with which we serve.”

This statement encapsulates his unwavering commitment to doing what is right, even when no one is watching.

His colleagues and subordinates consistently praised his integrity and commitment to ethical standards. They noted that he remained steadfast in his principles, refusing to yield to political pressure or external influences when making decisions regarding service delivery or personnel matters.

Dr. Malinga Fernando's dedication to integrity and ethics sets standards for all of us to follow.

Mentorship and Education: Cultivating Future Generations

Legendary medical administrators recognise their responsibility as mentors and educators. They invest in the professional development of others, serving as role models and exemplifying the attitudes and actions necessary for success. By sharing wisdom and nurturing talent, these leaders create a legacy that extends far beyond their own tenure.

A mentor offers

- Wisdom,
- Understanding,
- Encouragement for growth.

Through mentorship, individuals gain clarity, confidence, and motivation to succeed. The value of mentorship extends beyond knowledge; it is rooted in relationships built on

- Trust,
- Respect,
- Mutual growth.

Such relationships accelerate personal and professional development. Mentors provide advice, support, and insight, drawing from their experience. They guide others through challenges, offer constructive criticism, share knowledge, and introduce new perspectives.

Mentors also support personal growth, offering guidance on work-life balance, stress management, and decision-making.

“A mentor is someone who allows you to see the hope inside yourself.” — Oprah Winfrey. — American television personality, actress, and entrepreneur

Bill Walsh wisely observed, “Your mentors in life are important, choose them wisely”. Selecting supportive mentors ensures their influence will help you navigate life’s challenges and achieve meaningful growth.

Anecdotes of Mentorship: Lessons from Dr. Malinga Fernando

Reflecting on mentorship, I am reminded of my experiences with Dr. Malinga Fernando. one of my mentors and role models, whose guidance

helped shape my career and my approach to service and life.

I first met Dr. Fernando as a young medical officer in 1973 during an evening shift at LRH OPD. His imposing presence was immediately recognisable. When I stood to greet him, he kindly asked me to finish attending to my patient before speaking. This casual yet respectful attitude contrasted with his reputation as a stern taskmaster, leaving a lasting impression.

The rapport I built with Dr. Fernando proved invaluable in my later career at the National Institute of Health Sciences in 1978. He treated me like a younger brother, offering guidance and approvals essential to developing NIHS, including the utilisation of USAID funds.

On another occasion, he recruited me as a Short-Term Consultant to Bhutan in 1993 to assist the Royal Institute of Health Sciences (RISH). This role greatly benefited my professional growth.

His mentorship was crucial to my achievements and enabled me to serve effectively in the Ministry of Health. When I chose to retire early due to an injustice, though many senior medical administrators insisted that I continue, Dr. Fernando was the only one to call and reaffirm my decision, as he knew me better.

The last time I saw him was two years before his passing in 2008, at Dr. Susantha de Silva's wife's almsgiving in Nawala. We sat outside together, and he shared key incidents from his career.

During our conversation, he recounted how he averted a major trade union action in Galle, due to the then political strong man in Galle created an incident at the Galle General Hospital, which I also knew as I was working as MOH Unawatuna at that time. He remembered subordinates from years ago, highlighting his ability to value individuals.

Dr. Fernando was renowned as a stern taskmaster and disciplinarian who expected excellence, but those who knew him also witnessed his compassion and generosity.

Few saw this side of him, but those who did witnessed a genuinely generous and thoughtful individual.

I recall a World Health Assembly meeting in Geneva with Dr. Ananda Herath, where Dr. Fernando hosted us for a sumptuous meal that he had prepared himself. On another occasion, he encouraged me to buy crystal-cut glass wine sets, reflecting his passion as a collector, something I am sure Neluka still cherishes. In Mongolia, when

I hesitated about purchasing a renowned Mongolian carpet, he assured me he would arrange for it to be airlifted as unaccompanied baggage.

These anecdotes show Dr. Fernando's genuine kindness and simplicity. His mentorship was invaluable to my growth, and it's clear that being recognised as both a role model and mentor by subordinates is essential to being called a legendary medical administrator.

As we reflect on the virtues of legendary medical administrators, let us remember the profound impact that mentorship and education have on individual lives and the wider community.

In Conclusion,

Dr. Malinga Fernando exemplifies the distinctive virtues that define medical administrators in any healthcare setting. His inspirational leadership career set a benchmark for efficient and effective healthcare delivery, establishing a uniquely Sri Lankan standard of excellence. That is why I would like to name him a legendary Medical Administrator.

The legacy of mentors like Dr. Malinga Fernando and other legendary medical administrators lies in their commitment to nurturing talent and fostering growth in others. Their influence endures through the generations of professionals they inspire, guide, and empower.

Relevance to Modern Medical Administration

As we navigate through complex and modern healthcare, with its technological advances, demographic shifts, and evolving patient expectations, the virtues exemplified by legendary administrators are more relevant than ever.

Today's leaders must balance,

- Administrative responsibility with compassionate care,
- Champion innovation while upholding ethical standards,
- and serve as mentors.

Though challenges have changed, the core virtues remain timeless. In pursuing excellence, let us look to these role models as guiding lights, reminding us that authentic leadership is defined by virtues highlighted in this oration.

To all present—whether you are beginning your journey in medical administration or continuing a lifelong career, I urge you to reflect on the examples set by those who came before us.

- Lead with courage,
- Innovate boldly,
- Serve with compassion
- Act with integrity,
- Commit to mentoring others.

In doing so, you will not only advance your career but also uplift your institution and the lives it touches.

The legacy of legendary administrators is not a distant ideal, but a living tradition for each of us to uphold and renew.