



Cultivating Leadership Wisdom for Health Systems Development in Sri Lanka

Perspective Report on the Pre-Congress I of the Annual Scientific Sessions 2025

Samarakoon MASC^{1*}, Wijewickrama BAO², Tennakoon TMCLB²,
Pushpa Kumari HMN², Jayawardhana R², Gunasekara CTKS²

[*samiddhisamarakoon@yahoo.com](mailto:samiddhisamarakoon@yahoo.com)

¹Ministry of Health and Mass Media Sri Lanka, ²Post Graduate Institute of Medicine, University of Colombo

Introduction

The College of Medical Administrators of Sri Lanka (CMASL) recently convened its Pre-Congress Session I, themed "Leadership Wisdom through Academic Excellence," on 14th November 2025 at the National Hospital of Sri Lanka (NHSL) as part of the Annual Scientific Sessions 2025. The session was timely, acknowledging that medical administrators operate in a complex, volatile, uncertain, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment [1]. As the Sri Lankan health system faces a critical juncture—defined by evolving disease burdens, fiscal constraints, and the imperative to deliver equitable care—the need for capable leaders is self-evident. However, the discussions at the pre-congress panel, featuring Professor M. Thilakasiri, Senior Management Consultant, Dr Sarath Samarage, Senior Fellow of the Institute of Health Policy, and Dr Kithsiri Edirisinghe, CEO of the International Institute of Health Sciences, underscored a fundamental gap: academic excellence, while foundational, is insufficient on its own to navigate the monumental pressures of administrative leadership.

This perspective report, drawn from the dialogue and reflections of the pre-congress, argues that the future resilience of the Sri Lankan health system hinges on the formal cultivation of **Integrated Leadership Wisdom**. This wisdom, which transcends mere technical proficiency, must be established as the core competency for preparing the next generation of medical administrators. We specifically propose that adopting a focus on *Phronesis*—or Aristotelian practical wisdom—is the essential catalyst for translating theoretical knowledge into ethical, effective, and contextually relevant leadership actions.

From Knowledge to Wisdom: The Catalyst for Transformation

The discussion began by highlighting the distinction between knowledge and wisdom, a concept that underpins much of Prof. Thilakasiri's work [2]. Knowledge is often exemplified by data acquisition ("Knowledge is to know that a tomato is a fruit") while wisdom is contextual application ("Wisdom is to know that it should not be used in a fruit salad") [2].

In the Buddhist tradition, the term for wisdom, *Paññā* or *Prajñā*, refers to "transcendental insight" or the "understanding of the true nature of phenomena"—specifically their impermanence, non-self, and inherent unsatisfactoriness [3]. This insight, which transcends mere intellectual knowledge, naturally compels the administrator toward the ethical imperative of non-harming (*Ahimsa*), which Prof. Thilakasiri defined simply as "that which does not harm one's self or others" [2]. This profound ethical perspective is the bedrock of wise leadership.

Professor Thilakasiri's presentation, "From Knowledge to Wisdom: Shaping the Future of Healthcare Leadership," proposed that the transformation from knowledge to wisdom requires a fundamental mindset shift and an overhaul of educational methodologies [2]. This shift moves beyond traditional, more dependent learning models—specifically Pedagogy (teacher-

centric) and to some extent Andragogy (adult-focused but still content-driven) [4, 5]. For the medical administrator, where expertise already exists, the focus must shift to advanced models of self-determination and collaboration [5]:

- *Heutagogy: Self-determined learning where the learner decides what and how they learn, fostering the capacity to know how to learn* [5].
- *Peeragogy: Peer-to-peer, collaborative learning, crucial for building team dynamics and shared knowledge* [5].
- *Cybergogy: Learning facilitated by digital and virtual environments, essential for managing complex, geographically distributed systems* [5].

The move from the traditional to the self-determined models reflects the truth that the senior administrator is no longer a student but a lifelong learner who must actively construct wisdom through mentoring and peer sharing [2]. This transformation is essential for developing the capacity to master the 21st Century Skills Framework, which groups competencies crucial for navigating modern complexity: Learning and Innovation Skills (i.e., Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, Communication); Literacy Skills (i.e., Information, Media, and Technology Skills) and Life and Career Skills (i.e., Flexibility, Leadership, Initiative, Productivity, Social Skills) [6].

For the modern health administrator, this integrated wisdom involves:

- *Service with Empathy: Moving beyond budgets and targets to genuinely grasp the human impact of decisions.*
- *Policy with Practicality: Ensuring that policy recommendations are grounded in implementable reality, not just theoretical ideals.*
- *Budgets with Compassion: Allocating scarce resources ethically, always prioritizing patient welfare and staff well-being over purely financial expediency [7].*

Academic Excellence as the Leadership Compass (The Role of Episteme)

Dr. Sarath Samarage's presentation, "Academic Excellence as a Leadership Compass," emphasized that technical and academic rigour remains the essential starting point for ethical leadership [8]. Academic excellence provides the compass—a set of established principles and methodologies—that prevents a leader from being swept away by external "storms" [9].

In this context, the framework of the Leadership Compass is highly relevant, illustrating distinct leadership orientations that academic training must inform [9]:

- North (Action-Oriented / Driver): Values efficiency, results, and quick, decisive action.
- South (Nurturing / Supportive): Prioritizes group cohesion, emotional well-being, and collaboration.
- East (Visionary / Big Picture): Focuses on innovation, future trends, and long-term impact.
- West (Analytical / Detail-Oriented): Prefers to gather all facts, seek clarity, and ensure precision and thoroughness.

Academic training equips the administrator, especially the West/Analytical thinker, with the discipline to gather facts, challenge assumptions, and value precision [9]. This provides:

- *Evidence-Based Triage:* The ability to use epidemiological and research methodologies to quickly assess the true risk and impact of a crisis, rather than reacting solely to emotional or political pressure.
- *Integrity:* The commitment to the evidence base serves as a moral anchor, preventing leaders from succumbing to personal or external bias when allocating drugs, managing human resources, or formulating emergency policy [8].

The ultimate goal, however, is the Integrated Leader (Centre), who achieves balance and self-awareness and can fluidly shift between these styles depending on the situation [9]. The academic compass points to the necessary data, but

achieving the integrated style requires the human judgment to read it correctly in a storm—the "crossroads" Dr Edirisinghe refers to.

Wisdom in Action: Navigating the Ethical Crossroads (The Need for Phronesis)

Dr Kithsiri Edirisinghe's presentation, "Wisdom in Action: Leadership at Crossroads," addressed the pivotal moment when technical knowledge fails, and only practical wisdom can guide the decision [7]. This perspective resonates strongly with the ancient Greek concept of Phronesis—the intellectual virtue that guides ethical decision-making and judges how to apply universal moral principles (such as beneficence or justice) to a specific, unique situation [10].

The presentation highlighted that the current crisis points in healthcare—low equitable access, resource constraint management, and crisis management—cannot be solved by rote application of rules or protocols alone. They require a leader's character, values, and adaptability to come to the forefront [7].

- *Ethical Decision-Making:* Medical administrators constantly juggle competing values: patient autonomy, public health, justice, and financial sustainability [11]. Wise leadership in this scenario means grounding decisions in core ethical principles and relying on systematic ethics decision-making processes rather than individual "gut feeling" [7]. A prime example is the allocation of scarce resources during a major health emergency, which demands transparency and fairness [7].
- *Crisis Leadership:* The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the most effective leaders exhibited Agile Leadership (52.2%), Communication and Trust (19.5%), and Emotional Intelligence (EI) (15.8%), proving that "soft skills" and adaptability were as essential as technical know-how [12]. These are the non-academic, practical competencies that enable a leader to be visible, authentic, and adaptable under immense pressure.
- *The Emotional Quotient (EQ) as an Administrative Tool:* Daniel Goleman's research confirms that Emotional Intelligence (EI)—specifically self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness—is a critical determinant of performance, often outweighing IQ or technical skills in leadership roles [13]. For the medical administrator, high EI is the ability to "read the room," sense the mood of their team, and create the psychologically safe environment required for collaborative problem-solving and innovation [7, 14].

Cultivating the Legacy of Integrated Leadership Wisdom

The pre-congress discussions concluded with the strong consensus that wisdom cannot be taught from a textbook; it is cultivated over time through reflection and mentorship [7]. Experiential learning helps convert abstract concepts into practical judgment.

To prepare the next generation of leaders—those graduating from the MD and MSc programmes in Medical Administration—the CMASL and affiliated academic bodies must create a formal structure for cultivating this integrated wisdom:

1. **Formalizing Experiential Learning:** Postgraduate training must include mandatory, structured opportunities for administrators to observe veterans handling "grey areas" and "crossroads" moments, followed by formal, reflective debriefing sessions [7].
2. **Integrating Tacit Knowledge:** The curriculum should incorporate methodologies that bridge Explicit Knowledge (facts, theories) with Tacit Knowledge (experience, context, intuition) [2]. This involves case-based simulations, structured peerage-style learning, and reverse-mentoring where trainees advise senior executives on new technology or communication strategies.
3. **Mandatory EI Training:** Emotional Intelligence (Self-Awareness, Empathy, Relationship Management) must be explicitly taught and assessed, recognizing that these "soft skills" are the hard drivers of performance and trust [13, 14].
4. **The Single Actionable Legacy:** If there is one legacy item for tomorrow's leaders to write down, it is Professor Thilakasiri's call to action: "Strive for Service with Empathy, Policy with Practicality, Budgets with Compassion" [2]. This statement encapsulates the fusion of academic principle with the moral will and professional skill of practical wisdom.

Conclusion

The College of Medical Administrators of Sri Lanka has correctly identified that the greatest challenge in health system leadership is no longer a deficit of knowledge, but a deficit of wisdom in action. The Pre-Congress Session I provided a robust framework for addressing this: by formally integrating Aristotelian *Phronesis* with the established academic excellence and learning frameworks, CMASL can ensure that its future leaders are equipped not just to manage the complexity of the health system, but to navigate the ethical, political, and operational crossroads with integrity and vision. The pathway forward requires a unified focus: turning brilliant minds into wise, compassionate, and effective system guardians.

A Legacy of Wisdom: Voices of Prudence and Service

The essence of wise leadership, as discussed at the CMASL pre-congress, is timeless—a blend of intellectual rigour, ethical clarity, and selfless service. We offer these voices from major world traditions as guidance and inspiration for future medical administrators navigating the complexities of health systems development:

Tradition | Source | Quotation | Core Concept

Buddhist (Theravada) | Dhammapada, Verse 28 / Pali | "Irrigators direct the water; fletchers straighten arrows; carpenters bend wood; the wise conscientiously control themselves." [15] | **Self-Mastery & Prudence:** Emphasises that the wise leader achieves system control through rigorous self-discipline and reflection, the foundation of administrative wisdom.

Hindu | Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 47 | "You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty." [16] | **Detached Service:** Reinforces the ethos of selfless service (*Karma Yoga*). A leader must focus intensely on the quality of their effort (action) and duty (*Dharma*), free from anxiety about personal success or failure (results).

Islamic | Quaran | Surah An-Nisa (The Women), Ayat 58 | "Indeed, Allah commands you to render back the trusts to those to whom they are due, and that when you judge between men, you judge with justice." [17] | **Trust & Justice:** Places the highest ethical command on those in authority to uphold trustworthiness (*Amanah*) and ensure fairness (*Adl*) in all decisions, a direct mandate for equitable resource allocation in health administration.

Christian | Proverbs 11:14 | "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety." [18] | **Counsel & Collaboration:** Highlights the necessity of wisdom in seeking and incorporating diverse perspectives (*an abundance of counselors*)—reinforcing the value of multidisciplinary consultation and collaborative leadership.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to the President and Council of the College of Medical Administrators of Sri Lanka (CMASL) for their visionary leadership in setting the theme for the 32nd Annual Scientific Sessions. Special appreciation is extended to the Academic Subcommittee and the Organising Committee of the Pre-Congress for facilitating the insightful discussion. Finally, we thank the esteemed panellists—Professor M Thilakasiri, Dr Sarath Samarage, and Dr Kithsiri Edirisinghe—for sharing their wealth of knowledge and leadership wisdom, which catalyzed this article.

References

1. Institute for Health Policy. Improving The US Health Care System: The Case For Practical Wisdom. Health Affairs. 2025 May 30 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: <https://champ.berkeley.edu/publications/improving-us-health-care-system-case-practical-wisdom>
2. Thilakasiri M. From Knowledge to Wisdom: Shaping the Future of Healthcare Leadership. Presentation at: CMASL Pre-Congress Session I; 2025 Nov 21; National Hospital of Sri Lanka, Colombo.
3. Prajñā (Buddhism). Wikipedia. 2025 Nov 18 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: [https://www.google.com/search?q=https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Praj%C3%25B1%25C4%2581_\(Buddhism\)](https://www.google.com/search?q=https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Praj%C3%25B1%25C4%2581_(Buddhism))
4. Soultati E. Comparison of Pedagogy and Andragogy teaching methods. International Journal for Innovation Education and Research. 2023 Oct 30 [cited 2025 Nov 22];11(10):22–7. Available from: <https://scholarsjournal.net/index.php/ijer/article/view/4175>
5. Ishar SM. Heutagogy, Peeragogy, and Cybergogy Overview. Slideshare. 2025 Jun 17 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/heutagogy-peeragogy-cybergogy/87914326>
6. Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21). Framework for 21st Century Learning Definitions. P21; 2019 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: http://static.battelleforkids.org/documents/p21/P21_Framework_DefinitionsBFFK.pdf
7. Edirisinghe K. Wisdom in Action: Leadership at Crossroads. Presentation at: CMASL Pre-Congress Session I; 2025 Nov 21; National Hospital of Sri Lanka, Colombo.
8. Samarage S. Academic Excellence as a Leadership Compass. Presentation at: CMASL Pre-Congress Session I; 2025 Nov 21; National Hospital of Sri Lanka, Colombo.
9. International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB). Leadership Compass: A Self-Reflection Tool. IAPB; 2025.
10. Wears RL. Phronesis (Practical Wisdom) in Medical Practitioners: An Empirical Mixed Methods Study. SciSpace. 2023 May 15 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://scispace.com/pdf/enacted-phronesis-practical-wisdom-in-medical-practitioners-2w9wws5v.pdf>
11. American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE). Ethical Decision-Making for Healthcare Executives. ACHE; 2025 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: <https://www.ache.org/about-ache/our-story/our-commitments/ethics/ache-code-of-ethics/ethical-decision-making-for-healthcare-executives>
12. Clarke B, Frischmon T. Lessons Learned: How COVID-19 Changed Healthcare Leadership. Furst Group. 2025 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: <https://www.furstgroup.com/resources/lessons-learned-how-covid-19-changed-healthcare-leadership/>
13. Goleman D. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books; 1995.
14. Disruptive Leadership Institute. Goleman's Emotional & Social Intelligence (ESI) Framework. Disruptive Leadership Institute; 2025 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: https://www.disruptiveleadership.institute/goleman_emotional_social_intelligence/
15. Thailand Foundation. Insightful Sayings of the Buddha. Thailand Foundation; 2021 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: <https://thailandfoundation.or.th/general-buddhism-in-brief-2/>
16. Radha Krishna Temple of Dallas. Bhagavad Gita Quotes for Decision Making in Difficult Times. Radha Krishna Temple; 2025 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: <https://www.radhakrishnatemple.net/blog/bhagavad-gita-quotes-for-decision-making-in-difficult-times/>
17. Ali A. *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*. Leicester: Islamic Foundation; 1975.
18. Crossway. 10 Key Bible Verses on Wisdom and Discernment. Crossway; 2020 [cited 2025 Nov 22]. Available from: <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-key-bible-verses-on-wisdom-and-discernment/>