

Dr Sherva Cooray – a life entwined with psychiatry and service

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Those of us who knew her well were indeed saddened to hear of the passing away of Sherva Elizabeth Cooray (nee Silva) on 17 January 2024.

She was a retired consultant psychiatrist in intellectual disability, honorary senior lecturer at Imperial College Medical School, chair of the ICD-11 Intellectual Disability Working Group at the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych) and many more, in her professional life.

To us, psychiatrists in Sri Lanka, Sherva, was an energetic past President of the Sri Lankan Psychiatrists Association in the United Kingdom (SLPA-UK) who moulded and guided the association to great heights from its formative years having taken over as the second president of the fledgling organization. She went on to become the recipient of SLPA's first lifetime achievement award. This award was given in recognition of Sherva's enduring vision, creativity and enormous contributions not only to the field of psychiatry of intellectual disability, but to extending her expertise to her home country to develop mental health services in Sri Lanka.

Sherva was born in Sri Lanka and schooled at Holy Family Convent, Bambalapitiya. Here she excelled in many fields, but her academic brilliance ensured that she entered the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Colombo, the privilege of only a few exceptionally gifted females during her time, graduating in 1968.

Romance blossomed during this period and consolidating a match made in heaven she married Marius in 1972. The newlyweds moved to the UK for further studies. Shortly afterwards she started working as a registrar in psychiatry at Harperbury Hospital in Radlett where she found her true calling.

There was no stopping her thereafter and after completion of her psychiatry training and obtaining the membership of the RCPsych she was appointed consultant psychiatrist, Leavesden and Kingsbury Hospital. Following the closure of Leavesden Hospital she invested all her

energy into developing Kingsbury Hospital and the community service for persons with learning disability in Brent, almost single handedly, overcoming many challenges. She received the Fellowship of the RCPsych in 1999 and was elected a Fellow of the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists.

Since becoming a vibrant member of the SLPA she worked closely with the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists (SLCoP) to enable the College to achieve its objectives in developing psychiatric services in Sri Lanka. She supported psychiatric training in Sri Lanka extensively and invited many leading psychiatrists in the UK to Sri Lanka to give their expertise. Notable among them was Peter Tyrer, a former editor of the British Journal of Psychiatry with whom she was closely associated professionally with. She organised workshops and teaching programmes with the International College of Neuro-pharmacology in Colombo and Kandy. In 2009 in collaboration with the Institute of Psychiatry and funded by the Cooray Family Trust and World Psychiatric Association (WPA), she conducted a Training the trainers programme integrating mental health into primary care in Colombo, Kandy, Batticaloa, Galle and Jaffna. She also facilitated and delivered training in intellectual disability through the MhGAP Programme sponsored by the RCPsych and WHO in Sri Lanka, India, Sudan and Pakistan in 2012.

She was instrumental in the opening of the Bobby Somasunderam Unit for learning disability at the National Institute of Mental Health in Colombo and a Community day-care and obstetric unit in her ancestral property she donated in Wadduwa.

Sherva encouraged research among young trainees and awarded the Peter and Mabel Cooray medal for the best free paper presented at the annual academic sessions of the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists.

Throughout her endeavours she received the unstinted support of her late husband Marius and children Saliya,

Swyrie and Gemunu who not only provided support but also made personal contributions to the charitable efforts to develop mental health services in Sri Lanka.

It is with great affection and appreciation that we remember Sherva. She was a devoted friend, with an effervescent personality, and an inner vibrance that uplifted our spirits whenever we met her. Always overflowing with ideas and enthusiasm it was a pleasure to commune with her. She was ever the perfect host

organising meetings and dinners so that all our activities were relaxing and full of joyful camaraderie. Such was Sherva and we are sure she has achieved her well earned rest.

Acknowledgement

Anusha Wijeratne, Consultant Psychiatrist in Intellectual Disability and past president of the SLPA-UK, for assistance in sourcing information on Dr Sherva Cooray.