

Appreciation

Dr. Buddhadasa Waidyasekera

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Dr. Buddhadasa Waidyasekera, an iconic figure in the specialty of Psychiatry in Sri Lanka passed away in April, a few days after his eighty-sixth birthday. Being in poor health for several years, he was not involved in activities related to his profession for some time but those who were fortunate to associate with him remember him with great affection and gratitude, both for what he did for Psychiatry in Sri Lanka and also for them personally.

Dr. Waidyasekera was one of three psychiatrists from the Galle region who were standard bearers in their chosen specialty in a different era, the others being the late Dr. D.V. J. Harischandra and Dr. Ranjith Jayawardana. This was a time when few opted for a career in Psychiatry and specialisation involved completing examinations of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the United Kingdom, the Post-graduate Institute of Medicine (PGIM) being in its infancy then.

Dr. Waidyasekera was passionate about the welfare of those with mental health issues. He contributed immensely to the activities of the Sri Lanka Psychiatric Association, serving as its President in 2001. The Association was incorporated in 2003 as the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists, the apex professional body of psychiatrists in the country.

Having had the good fortune of training under Dr. Waidyasekera at the beginning of my career at a time when he was nearing retirement, it was a learning exercise on a daily basis to watch him interview patients. Registrars would often marvel at the ease with which patients confided in him within a few minutes, while trainees laboured for hours without eliciting much.

He then wore three hats at Mental Hospital, Angoda – as it was then known – consultant psychiatrist, forensic psychiatrist and medical superintendent but he managed them all. Slight of stature but blessed with a stentorian voice and salt-and-pepper sideburns, he was a commanding presence when he strode the corridors of the hospital with poise and purpose. If he had a passion greater than Psychiatry, it was elevating Mental Hospital Angoda to be an institution of repute, not ridicule.

Training under Dr. Waidyasekera was not an easy task though. As a trainer, he had a reputation of being a stern taskmaster. He was an expert judge of character, not only of his patients but also of medical officers under his supervision. Despite the heavy workload that trainees had to cope with because his commitment to both the general and forensic wards, working with him was an enlightening experience.

He would regale his juniors with stories of how his Ayurvedic Physician father had named him ‘Buddhadasa’ – after the physician King – in the hope that he would become a doctor and of his childhood spent in Uluwitike and Hirimubura in Galle before proceeding to Mahinda College – and relating various anecdotes, especially relating to his experiences as a forensic psychiatrist, often with a mischievous sense of humour, revealing that beneath that strict veneer, there was a softer, gentler person.

He may have been an excellent clinician but Dr. Waidyasekera often saw mental illness as a way of life despite its biological basis. He would compare aspects of mental illness with concepts in Buddhism, Philosophy and Socialism, all of them being subjects he explored avidly. As a result, at the end of a clinical discussion with him, trainees were often left pondering not only about a particular diagnosis and treatment options but also about a different perspective in life. That is what made him special as a trainer.

Despite the many titles he held, including President of the Sri Lanka Psychiatric Association and Chair of the Board of Study in Psychiatry at the PGIM, Dr. Waidyasekera was modest about his own achievements and about the role of the psychiatrist. He was fond of repeating, with a smile, two quotes: “Men will always be mad and those who claimed they could cure them are the maddest of them all” (Voltaire) and “sabbe pruthagjana unmaththaka” or “all beings are mad” (Lord Buddha). Academic titles and professional achievements sat lightly on him and he would often say that he takes most pride not in what he did as psychiatrist but as a father, raising two children and animatedly discussing their progress as they followed in his footsteps becoming medical

professionals, one as an academic and the other emulating him to become a psychiatrist.

As a 'boss', Dr. Waidyasekera went above and beyond being a supervising consultant. He took an abiding interest in the trainees' welfare and personal circumstances and would make allowances where necessary. Even after doctors had done their stint of training with him, he monitored their progress keenly, offering them invaluable advice, guidance and support. Many a trainee would testify to this humane quality of his. When Dr. Waidyasekera was President of the Sri Lanka Psychiatric Association in 2001, in his presidential address he expressed the hope that the Mental Hospital, Angoda would be converted to a National Institute of Mental Health and that Sri Lanka's mental health laws would be overhauled. Ironically, twenty-five years later, while his first aspiration has been realised, the other hasn't.

It was a great pity and a tremendous loss to Psychiatry in Sri Lanka that Dr. Waidyasekera's involvement in clinical and other activities related to the profession ceased in 2004 due to a sudden illness, which he battled stoically while his family cared for him lovingly. As a result of this premature end to a stellar career, a generation of Sri Lankan psychiatrists were deprived of his wisdom and wholesome approach to mental health care.

Nevertheless, a different generation of psychiatrists, now nearing their own retirement will readily acknowledge that they are where they are today, be it in Sri Lanka or overseas, is at least in part due to the skills and values they gleaned from Dr. Buddhadasa Waidyasekera, when they were his trainee.

Farewell, Sir, sad though your passing is, you have enriched the specialty of Psychiatry in Sri Lanka as few have done and we count ourselves privileged to have been witnesses to that contribution.