

Appreciation

Dr Harischandra Gambheera

By Prof. Shehan Williams and Dr. Jayan Mendis

SL J Psychiatry 2026; 17(1): 94

It came as a shock to many when Dr Harischandra Gambheera passed away within the span of a few days while still in active practice in April this year. Hailing from Walasmulla in the deep south, his cleverness took him to the halls of the renowned University of Peradeniya, from where he qualified as a physician. It was here that the young Dr Gambheera found his lifetime partner in Padma, a prominent consultant dental surgeon, who supported his achievements in the field of psychiatry.

Dr Gambheera was a colossus in psychiatry in Sri Lanka. On returning from Australia after his postgraduate training in 2002, he was instrumental in elevating the Sri Lanka Psychiatrists Association to the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatry. He became its founder Secretary and then its President from 2007-2009. Thereafter, he went on to become the President of the SAARC Psychiatric Federation from 2009-2010. His achievements are too numerous to mention in a few paragraphs. We will but highlight a few.

He served first at General Hospital Anuradhapura and then moved to the Mental Hospital in Angoda in 2003, where he played a pivotal role in elevating it to the National Institute of Mental Health and became its founding Chair of the Research and Ethics Committee. His contribution to elevating the status of this institution to a centre of academic and clinical excellence cannot be understated.

He rendered yeoman service following the tsunami in 2004, helping affected persons rebuild their lives by conducting clinics in Matara. He played a significant role in developing the first Mental Health Policy of Sri Lanka. He laboured intensively in drafting the Mental Health Act, which is still in the pipeline. He was a remarkable lecturer and a dedicated trainer. His teaching of psychopathology to generations of registrars is

legendary. He was a feared examiner who went on to chair the Board of Study in Psychiatry at the Postgraduate Institute of Medicine (PGIM), University of Colombo, for three years.

Dr Gambheera was an intelligent mind paired with an unrelenting passion. His passion was to challenge the easy answers and find the better answers that would make a better world. We were inspired by his determination to take up challenges until his final moments. His final passion was to reform education in Sri Lanka, and his last book on the topic was printed a week before his passing.

His passion was not loud for the sake of noise – it was purposeful. It drove change. It sparked ideas. It brought people together, whether the government doctors, specialists, the College of Psychiatrists, the PGIM, or the SAARC psychiatric fraternity – the domains in which he lent his leadership. And even in moments of uncertainty, he stood firm, guided by principles that never wavered.

And in the spirit of Homer, whom Dr Gambheera had read many times, we are reminded that true legacy is not carved in stone, but carried in memory. His story-like those ancient epics – will endure, not because it was written, but because it was lived so fully and so well.

We will remember his words, his characteristic jokes and laughter, his determination – but more than that, we will carry forward what he gave us: the courage to think boldly, the strength to act justly, and the compassion to lead with heart.

He will be remembered in our corridors and our conversations as long as we live. We take solace in the fact that his life was well lived.