

Urology news

The establishment of urology as a specialty: Historical context and the Sri Lankan perspective

Celebrating the legacy of Sri Lanka's urological pioneer

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“If I have seen farther than others.it is because I was standing on the shoulders of giants”

-Sir Isaac Newton”

Evolution of urology as a specialty

The practice of urology has deep historical roots, with references to genitourinary diseases found in ancient medical texts. Notable ancient physicians, such as Hippocrates, recognized and documented urinary ailments. Hippocrates' famous quote, "I will not cut for stone, but will leave this to men who are practitioners of this work," is often cited as an early acknowledgment of urology as a distinct medical practice. However, it was not until advancements in surgical techniques and instrumentation in the 19th and 20th centuries that urology began to emerge as a separate medical specialty.

Historically Urology was formally established as a specialty in 1890 with the appointment of Felix Guyon as the first Professor of Urology in Paris, marking a significant milestone in the discipline's development. This followed technological advancements that greatly improved the diagnosis and treatment of urinary tract conditions.

In Britain, the evolution of urology prior to 1960 was marked by key developments in surgical techniques and instrumentation. In the 18th century, William Cheselden (1688–1752) introduced a safer approach to

bladder stone surgery with his "lateral lithotomy" technique, which reduced patient mortality. By the 19th century, Sir Henry Thompson (1820–1904) had pioneered the use of lithotripsy, a method for crushing bladder stones, and advanced the development of surgical instruments. Thompson's contributions helped lay the foundation for modern urology, and he was among the first surgeons to exclusively focus on urinary tract diseases.

The advent of cystoscopy in 1877 by Max Nitze was another critical breakthrough, enabling direct visualization of the urinary tract and facilitating more precise surgical interventions. Specialist institutions, such as St. Peter's Hospital for Stone in London (founded in 1860), became leading centers for urological excellence.

In the United States, urology gained formal recognition as a specialty around 1910, following the appointment of Hugh Hampton Young as the Professor of Urology at Johns Hopkins Hospital. This appointment further solidified the specialty's standing within the medical community.

Pioneering Urology in Sri Lanka



George Nelson Perera (1915 - 2009)

In Sri Lanka, urology was initially practiced by general surgeons as part of their broader surgical responsibilities. Dr. George Nelson Perera (1915–2009) is recognized as the pioneer of genitourinary surgery in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). His career as a consultant surgeon spanned from 1957 to 1971, during which he transitioned from general surgery to specializing in genitourinary surgery.

Dr. Perera was born on 14 November 1915 in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka. He was the son of Cornelius Sylvester Martin Perera, the first Ceylonese superintendent of a British-owned tea estate, and Stella Dharmaratne. Educated at Prince of Wales College in Moratuwa and later at St. Joseph's College in Colombo, Dr. Perera passed the London University matriculation examination in 1935. He studied medicine at the Ceylon Medical College in Colombo from 1936 to 1941, graduating with first-class honors. During his medical studies, he served in the Ceylon Medical Corps and was demobilized at the end of World War II with the rank of captain.

Much of Dr. Perera's surgical training took place under the mentorship of Professor Milroy Paul, a distinguished figure in Ceylonese surgery with strong affiliations to the Royal College of Surgeons in the UK.

In 1953, Dr. Perera traveled to England for postgraduate training and worked under Professor Charles Alexander Wells, CBE (1898–1989), a renowned general surgeon with a special interest in genitourinary surgery, based in Liverpool.

In a personal communication with the author, Dr. George Perera emphasized the profound inspiration he received from Professor Wells during his time in Liverpool. Professor Wells had been appointed in 1945 to lead the newly established academic department of surgery at the University of Liverpool. At that time, the department was limited to just three dark small rooms in the basement of the anatomy school. However, under Professor Wells' visionary leadership, the department rapidly expanded and became a fully-fledged surgical unit with a focus on urology. His work attracted many talented young surgeons from the UK and across the globe, including trainees from Australia, New Zealand, India, Sri Lanka (notably Dr. George Perera), Pakistan, and Canada.

Dr Perera fondly remembered Prof Wells, not only as a skilled surgeon but also a nurturing mentor who was deeply committed to the development of his trainees. His influence extended far beyond the operating room, fostering an environment of academic and professional excellence that drew aspiring urologists from diverse backgrounds.

Upon returning to Sri Lanka, Dr. Perera established a dedicated urology unit at the General Hospital in Colombo (now the National Hospital of Sri Lanka). He equipped the operating theatres with state-of-the-art instruments and created a male ward (Ward 22), along with beds for female patients. He also arranged for two male nurses to receive specialized training in urology at the Institute of Urology in London, a rare opportunity even today.

While his main practice was in open urological surgery, Dr. Perera is credited with performing the first endoscopic resection of the prostate in Sri Lanka using a McCarthy resectoscope, with assistance from his trainee, Dr. Lalith M. Perera.

Dr. Perera faced significant resistance from his general surgical colleagues during the establishment of urology as a distinct specialty. Anecdotally, this opposition culminated in a notorious court case in which general surgeons challenged his right to perform a hydrocelectomy. During the trial, Dr. Perera humorously defended his position by referencing his mother's teachings about the anatomical definition of the genitals, which led to an outburst of laughter in the courtroom. Although briefly accused of contempt, he was exonerated with a minor fine.

Dr. Perera was a dedicated teacher who inspired many trainees to pursue urology. His protégés included Drs. Lakshman

Attygalle, Lalith M. Perera, and A.M. Beligaswatte. He was an active member of the British Medical Association (Ceylon branch), which later became the Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA), and served as the founding patron of the Sri Lanka Association of Urological Surgeons, established in 1999.

After retiring from state service in 1971, Dr. Perera continued working in the private sector for several years. Outside of medicine, he enjoyed powerboat racing, water-skiing, and fishing. He was a member of the Catamaran Club and the Power Boat Association of Sri Lanka, as well as a life member of the Royal Colombo Golf Club.

Dr. Perera passed away on 27 January 2009, survived by his wife Phoebe (née Peiris) and their three children: Lahari, Gayan (a doctor), and Sarath (an engineer).