

Dr Ponniah Sivasubramaniam, FRCS. Personal glimpses of a Sri Lankan pioneer's contributions to ophthalmology

by Dr S Anandarajan, FRCS, printed by Ceylon Printers Limited, Colombo, pp 72, illustrated. (no date).

Biographies of medical men are rare in Sri Lanka. It is difficult to fathom the reasons for this scarcity. We have had renowned and highly respected doctors in the Colombo Group of Hospitals, but surprisingly, to my knowledge, no substantive biography of any of them has appeared. It is, therefore, highly commendable for Dr S Anandarajan to write a biography of Dr P Sivasubramaniam. What is all the more enticing is the fact that the subject is a living personality.

As mentioned in the book, Dr Sivasubramaniam is the pioneer of modern ophthalmology in Sri Lanka. He has qualities that mark him as an outstanding ophthalmologist. He was a clinician *par excellence*, a fine research worker and prolific writer, and a dedicated teacher who encouraged others to take up to his discipline.

His clinical prowess was recognised early in his career. When he was working in Jaffna in the early 1950s, patients from far and wide used to consult him. It was not uncommon for patients living as far south as Matara to make the journey to the northern capital to undergo eye surgery. Their relatives sometimes had to stay in Jaffna for weeks. This temporary migration was quite unusual, for the order of the day, then as now, was for patients to come to Colombo, where the most experienced doctors worked. Even patients from south India and Malaysia sought his services. A reversal of this trend is now seen with Sri Lankans seeking treatment in India and Singapore, a sad commentary on our state of the art due to shortage resources and equipment.

The author, himself an ophthalmologist who owes his specialisation to the interest taken by Dr Sivasubramaniam, speaks at length on the acumen shown by him in training others.

Dr Sivasubramaniam occupied high positions in various medical associations. He was honorary secretary of

the clinical societies in Jaffna and Kandy, and president of Ophthalmological Society of Ceylon, Section A of the Ceylon Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA). His term as president of the SLMA is notable for a historic development. He proposed that those who intended to attend the annual sessions should pay a nominal registration fee. This was the first time that such a step was proposed, and as is to be expected when a radical measure is proposed for the first time, there was much objection in the council. He ultimately had his way, and now the registration fee is a regular feature in all annual sessions.

The first institution for the treatment of eye disease was opened in the premises of General Hospital Colombo in 1895. It was known as the Grenier Eye and Ear Infirmary. It was placed in charge of Dr W H de Silva, who looked after eye diseases, while Dr Harry Hilliard was appointed as Ear Surgeon. When the Victoria Memorial Eye Hospital was established in 1906, Dr de Silva, the father of Professor C C de Silva, became Honorary Surgeon. He held the degree of FRCS (Edin), specialising in ophthalmology. When Dr Sivasubramaniam was appointed surgeon at this hospital in 1955, he became the first specialist with FRCS (Eng) in ophthalmology.

He enriched ophthalmological literature by writing books and research papers. He published three books, two of them with Dr Anandarajan on *Paediatric ophthalmology* and *Neuro-ophthalmology*. He contributed a large number of research papers to many journals, the cream of them being 14 articles to *British Journal of Ophthalmology*. He could be cited as one of the most prolific medical writers in Sri Lanka.

Dr Anandarajan should be congratulated for writing this biography of a remarkable personality who has done so much for ophthalmology and for patients with ophthalmic diseases in Sri Lanka.

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