

Professor Priyani Soysa

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Introduction

Priyani Elizabeth Soysa nee De Mel was born in 1925 in Moratuwa as the second of three daughters of Millen and Beatrice De Mel.

She had her primary and secondary education in Princess of Wales College, Moratuwa where she excelled in both sports and studies. She entered the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ceylon in 1945 and graduated with MBBS first class honours in 1950.

After a brief period of service in the Department of Health she proceeded to the United Kingdom for postgraduate studies in paediatrics. Returning with MRCP (Edin), and DCH (Eng), she also became the first woman to receive MD (Cey).

At the age of 30, she was appointed as the first Consultant Paediatrician in Jaffna and set up the children's ward in the General Hospital Jaffna. She did the same at General Hospital Rathnapura and General Hospital Kurunegala. After 11 years of service in the Department of Health in 1966, at the age of 41, she was appointed as the Chair Professor in Paediatrics at the University of Ceylon, succeeding her guru Professor CC De Silva. She was the first woman to be appointed as a professor in the university system in Ceylon. She remained in this post for 25 years until her retirement in 1991. During this period, she strode the medical landscape in Sri Lanka like a colossus.

She diversified the teaching of paediatrics, introduced a family attachment in the community health project area at Kotte, and involved paraclinical teachers in clinical teaching in an integrated ward class. Paediatrics was made a separate subject at the Final MBBS and continuous assessment, including appraisal by medical and nursing staff, was included. Though widely accepted now, these were novel and innovative concepts then. She introduced the teaching of genetics to the clinical curriculum and was an advisor to the faculty board in setting up the Human Genetics Unit.

She was the first Chairperson of the Board of Study in Paediatrics of the Postgraduate Institute of

Medicine (PGIM) in 1981 and remained in this post for three terms. She was the Chief Examiner at the MD in Paediatrics and the Diploma in Child Health Examinations during this period and could thus be credited as laying the foundation for postgraduate education in Paediatrics in Sri Lanka. Her impact was strengthened by being a member of the Board of Management of the PGIM during this period.

In spite of a busy clinical practice and teaching schedule, Professor Priyani Soysa involved herself in research, professional development and policymaking at the highest level, locally and internationally. Her pre-eminence in this aspect is evident from the string of positions she held in professional associations and statutory bodies. These positions included holding the role of the President of; the Nutrition Society of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lanka Paediatric Association, the Ceylon College of Physicians in its silver jubilee year (1992), the Sri Lanka Medical Association and the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science (SLAAS).

After retirement, she was appointed to the post of Director General of the Natural Resources Environment and Science Agency (NARESA). When the National Science Foundation (NSF) was created she became its first Chairperson.

She also played an important consultative role in several international agencies such as the WHO and the UN Sub-Committee of Nutrition (USCN). She was chairperson of the advisory committee on maternal and young child nutrition for 10 years, overseeing the implementation of policies such as exclusive breastfeeding for 4-6 months and complementary feeding strategies using a homemade multi mix of locally available foods.

She was the key strategist in getting the measles vaccine into the immunisation schedule. Her advocacy enabled provision of 4 months of maternity leave for breastfeeding mothers. She was actively involved in getting the WHO code of marketing breast milk substitutes enacted locally and overseeing its implementation



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Appreciation

correctly. She was the Chairperson of the committee that oversaw the elimination of poliomyelitis from Sri Lanka.

She was awarded the highest national honour Deshamanya for her contributions to Health, Nutrition and Education.

Her personal portfolio of research publications and presentations was extensive and included some seminal papers on birth weight, infant feeding, infectious diseases, and genetics. In the centenary academic sessions of the Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA) she was invited to deliver the Centenary Oration. She presented a concise overview of her research in the oration entitled "Today's Children: The World of Tomorrow".

At the height of her career, she was struck a major blow when she was sued for negligence by a senior lawyer who was the father of a 3-year-old girl initially managed by her, on a presumptive diagnosis of rheumatic chorea, who later turned out to have a brain stem glioma. After a bruising legal battle, she was exonerated by a three judge bench of the Supreme Court which also awarded her the costs of litigation. This was declined by her. She faced this adversity with dignity and decorum and emerged with her professional reputation intact.

Professor Priyani Soysa combined a busy professional life with a happy and active family life. She was married to her batchmate in medical school, Dr Ananda Soysa, Consultant ENT Surgeon, General Hospital, Colombo and past president of the Sri Lanka

College of Surgeons. They have four daughters, Dharini, Chandini, Keshini, and Thilina, four grandchildren and one great grandchild.

She was a warm-hearted and considerate physician, with a vivacious personality. During her ward rounds, in addition to the clinical teaching, she regaled us with vignettes of her family life, at times including descriptions of the day's menu. Having experienced her lavish hospitality and exceptional culinary abilities on occasions when she invited the members of staff to her small but elegant home, I felt that students unknowingly gained sophistication in their knowledge of food and nutrition!

On a personal note, I was in the first group of students to do clinical training under her supervision at the Lady Ridgeway Hospital (LRH). In 1971 I became the Registrar in the University Paediatric Unit, LRH, and subsequently joined the permanent academic staff of the University of Colombo. I was able to pursue my interest in social paediatrics, which I developed as a student during the family attachment programme. Professor Priyani Soysa encouraged and supported me in this endeavour. She has been my mentor and guide throughout my professional life.

She passed away peacefully at the age of 97 years, in her cosy apartment in Colombo where she had been living with her husband, Ananda. Her husband predeceased her by 3 years, having lived an active and fulfilling personal and professional life she was perfectly alert right to the end. In keeping with her Christian belief, may her soul rest in peace.

Professor Narada Warnasuriya

Emeritus Professor

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