

Obituary

Emeritus Professor of Paediatrics Priyani Elizabeth Soysa: An icon is no more

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That fantastic lady, a reputed *persona grata* of eminence, as well as a teacher of repute who lit up the field of paediatric healthcare, Emeritus Professor of Paediatrics, Deshamanya Priyani Elizabeth Soysa MBBS(Cey), DCH(Eng), MD(Cey), DSc (Ruhuna) *Honoris causa*, FRCP(Edin), FRCP(Lond), FRCPCH(UK), FCCP(SL), FSLCPaed, most peacefully bid *adieu* to this mortal world on Good Friday the 7th of April 2023.

The 97 years that she had spent on this planet earth, where she served our Motherland to her last breath, is one of seminal significance for the services she provided in caring for children. As a student and a mentee of hers, I am deeply saddened by her demise and am quite sure that many others in the medical profession, as well as those members of the general public who have come under her captivating influence, would share those very same sentiments. She will always be remembered as an unmatched change-maker in the paediatric scenario.

How does one start and where does one end in recounting the details of the lifetime of a person who lived a kind of life that defies even rational exposition? Needless to say, young Priyani Elizabeth De Mel had excelled as the brightest of stars at her alma mater, Princess of Wales College in Moratuwa. Then her meteoric sojourn as a student in the Colombo Faculty of Medicine culminating in First Class Honours in the Final MBBS Examination was the forerunner to a dedicated career that saw her go higher and higher in her academic pursuits. An acclaimed clinician and a researcher of repute, she functioned as a paediatrician in various parts of the country including Jaffna and then became the first woman in Sri Lanka to be

appointed as a Chair Professor. That occurrence came about when she succeeded her guru and mentor, Professor C. C. de Silva, as the Professor of Paediatrics in the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ceylon and subsequently the University of Colombo. She held that exalted position as the Chair Professor of Paediatrics for 25 years before retiring in 1991. We share nostalgic memories of this fantastic personality, who in addition to all her sublime qualities, was also a most capable administrator and a policy maker; one who had a vision that she pursued through a resolute pathway of unbridled commitment.

Professor Priyani Soysa is well-known and supremely recognised for many a battle that she fought, very often in a single-handed dedication towards the welfare of little children in our country. When she assumed duties as the Chair Professor of Paediatrics, the subject of healthcare of children was just a part of Adult Medicine in the Faculty of Medicine. Professor Soysa managed to convert paediatrics into a subject in its own right that was tested in the Final MBBS Examination.

Professor Soysa had an abiding interest in childhood nutrition. Long before the current scientific evidence regarding the crucial importance of nutrition in the well-being of children emerged, she fought a valiant skirmish to ensure proper nutrition for children. Malnutrition was rampant in the country at the time she assumed the high office of the Chair of Paediatrics. Professor Soysa became an unwavering advocate of exclusive breastfeeding of all babies for the first six months of life. In that endeavour, she fought a lone but heroic battle against the might of the infant formula milk food manufacturers. Artificial cow

milk-based formula foods were the fashion of the Western world and it was no mean task to fight against the Western manufacturers of these infant foods. Professor Soysa declared all-out war on them and their subtle efforts at jeopardising exclusive breastfeeding initiatives. She worked ever so hard to change the mindset of Sri Lankan mothers from bottle feeding to breastfeeding. This was such a great achievement as at that time breastfeeding was not considered to be 'fashionable.'

As the undisputed champion of exclusive breastfeeding, Professor Soysa played a major role in securing maternity leave for working mothers and that effort tipped the balance against the infant milk food industry most decisively. The fact that today we have an over 90 percent rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life is eternal testimony to her work as the undisputed winner of that initiative. Her work in that respect has shown a pivotal influence, not only in Sri Lanka but globally as well.

Professor Priyani Soysa is a Past President of the Sri Lanka Paediatric Association (now known as the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians), the Sri Lanka Medical Association and the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science. As a gesture of genuine appreciation, the Sri Lanka Medical Association, the oldest medical organisation in Asia and Australasia, awarded her the Honorary Life Membership during its 125th Anniversary celebrations in 2012. In grateful recognition of her services to the country, the government of Sri Lanka bestowed on her the coveted national titular honour of Deshamanya in a glittering investiture ceremony at Nelum Pokuna Theatre in 2017, attended and presided over by the Executive President of Sri Lanka.

In addition to being a splendid academic, Professor Soysa was a marvellous family person, devoted to her husband, the reputed ENT Surgeon Deshabandu Dr Ananda Soysa, who predeceased her in 2019. They have four daughters, Dharini, Chandini, Keshini and Thilina, to whom Madam Priyani was an exemplary mother. Those who have had the privilege to be at a meal in the Soysa household would vouch for the abilities of Professor Priyani Soysa as an accomplished chef as well.

The medical paediatric fraternity of Sri Lanka owes her a lot. Many of us have learnt the basics of paediatrics from her. But then, what we learnt from her goes even further than that. As a personal anecdote, I know for sure how she responded to a problem that myself and my allocated working partner had with a family that was assigned to us for the Social Paediatrics appointment when we were doing the Professorial Paediatric appointment in our final year in the Faculty of Medicine. That family was so poor that they lived a frugal hand-to-mouth existence. We noticed that they did not have a toilet. When the good professor was grilling us during discussions that involved the entire group of medical students, I was forced to tell the professor that the lack of a toilet was the least of their problems when they did not know where the next meal was coming from. The professor did not say anything but we found out later that she had used her own personal funds to build a toilet for that family. She had done it

without telling anybody. It just went to show that beneath her professorial strict façade, there was a very kind heart that was capable of exhibiting the wonderful quality of empathy.

One could write reams about our guru Professor Priyani Soysa. But even then, we would not be able to get through all that we want to say. Her daughters and the members of the immediate families are sure to feel the intense pain of losing a loved one who was definitely like no other. We hasten to proclaim that their loss is our loss as well.

No doubt a company of angels would have escorted her to her divine heavenly abode on the 7th of April 2023 and the 10th of April 2023 was the day we saw her for the last time when we took part in the final rites for her mortal remains. We were honoured and greatly privileged to join her in her last journey on earth.

Yet for all that dear Madam Soysa, you will stay in our hearts forever, till we meet again, at some time in the future.

Dr B. J. C. Perera