

Interview

Coeditor Dulshika Waas meets Professor Samudra Kathriarachchi, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry for the first interview in a series of interviews with eminent psychiatrists in Sri Lanka



Professor Samudra Kathriarachchi

For my first interview as coeditor of the Journal, there is nobody more appropriate than the first coeditor of the Journal and past president of the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists, Emeritus Professor Samudra Kathriarachchi. Professor Kathriarachchi was the first female Chair Professor in psychiatry in Sri Lanka and retired in January 2023 as the Senior Professor of the Department of Psychiatry, University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

I met her first when I worked at the Department of Psychiatry as a demonstrator in 1998. I also had the honour of being the Secretary of the SLCPsych during her tenure as the President from August 2014 to September 2016.

Thank you for this opportunity, Professor Kathriarachchi. I would like to start our interview by asking you to tell me about the highlights of your career

I would say pioneering the setting up of the Department of Psychiatry at the Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura and developing a state-of-the-art psychiatry unit “Manasuwapiyasa” at Colombo South Teaching Hospital, Kalubowila. The initiation of the diploma in counselling course at the faculty is another.

I also chaired the University Grants Commission Committee that prepared the undergraduate curriculum for psychiatry as a final year merit subject.

In addition to undergraduate psychiatry, I have been involved with the Board of Study in Psychiatry at the Postgraduate Institute of Medicine, University of Colombo. I have been the Secretary, and Chairperson of the Board and the Chief Examiner of the MD psychiatry examination. I was the chairperson of the committee that introduced old age psychiatry as a subspeciality.

I also chaired the Expert Committee on Suicide Prevention of the Sri Lanka Medical Association.

I was actively involved with the then Sri Lanka Psychiatric Association since its revival in 1996 and was the secretary in 2001. I was a signatory to the constitution of the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists and served as the President of the College for two terms.

Serving on the Asian Federation of Psychiatric Associations as a council member and treasurer is another milestone.

Could you tell us a bit of history of the College Journal?

Initially news letters were published quarterly. The coeditor Dr Shavindra Dias and I managed to convince the Council of the need of a journal. The first issue was published in 2010. Professors Janaka de Silva and Rezvi Sheriff graced the launch of the first issue. The issue contained an editorial on the publication of research, an invited article by Prof Nalaka Mendis, research articles, research news, a case report and a picture story on ‘Help to Heal’ by Dr S.Sivadas. It was a biannual publication.

It is heartening to see that subsequent editors have made it a much sought after Journal with contributions from many professionals including contributions from overseas. It is my fervent wish that the Journal will reach the status of an indexed journal in the near future!

Research carried out as a partial requirement for board certification in psychiatry, other postgraduate examinations and other research collaborations are worth disseminating in an appropriate forum for fellow members to learn. I’d like to add that if the College creates a research forum it will serve this function as research writing receives low priority amongst busy clinicians.

Tell us about your tenure as the President of the College

I faced many challenges and obstacles from the time of nomination. There was contest for the post of president elect and I won by a two third majority. I strived to be inclusive in all college activities. My principles were inclusiveness, delegation and trust, shared responsibility, demolition of psychological barriers and collaborative work with national and international organisations. My council included a lot of new members. The subcommittees included both young and experienced members who contributed to the upliftment in many areas like old age psychiatry, perinatal psychiatry and continuous professional development programme.

The SLCPsych collaborated with the Family Health Bureau to develop the psychological autopsy tool for maternal suicides. An international collaboration was the International Conference held with the World Psychiatric Association and the Association of Federation of Psychiatric Associations on the theme 'New Horizons in Asian Psychiatry: Choosing Wisely'. It was an astounding success with more than three hundred delegates attending it.

Another international collaboration was with the Royal Australian New Zealand College of Psychiatrists in commencing the formal continuous Professional Development Programme for psychiatrists in Sri Lanka, in accordance with the Sri Lanka Medical Association guidelines. The publications were supported by The Asia Foundation.

An award for the best regional psychiatrist was started to recognize and encourage innovation and good practices amongst the regional psychiatrists in the country.

Overall, I feel the two years of presidency was an enriching experience for myself and many young psychiatrists as we worked towards the betterment of psychiatry in Sri Lanka. We were able to highlight Sri Lanka in the world of psychiatry. I am glad to observe the continued trend with subsequent presidents of the college and the current president and council.

What are your thoughts on the future of psychiatry in Sri Lanka?

This is a challenging question! The current trend of psychiatrists seeking employment in countries with stability and higher wages, will adversely affect the development and delivery of mental health services in Sri Lanka. However, we psychiatrists have a degree of resilience and adaptability, my prediction is that those who remain in the country will continue to provide services and continue to work towards upliftment of the discipline. Those who migrate also have a vested interest in supporting the local initiatives and this will be of much benefit.

Overall, I am of the view that psychiatry as a discipline will flourish in Sri Lanka as those who stay on are committed.

Finally, what advice do you have for the new generation of psychiatrists in Sri Lanka?

There is no doubt that this is a challenging time for us in Sri Lanka. In order to face these challenges, we need to have team spirit and work towards a common goal. We need to work, interacting and associating with people having different ideas within the discipline and otherwise. Listening to other's views, respecting their right to hold/change their ideas and being open to discussion will help in effective conflict resolution and growth.

Secondly, I feel sustainable, objective and realistic local projects need to be initiated and supported.

Thirdly, we should be opened to new local and global trends. Wise use of new technology is needed to adapt to a new and challenging cultural shift. The best way forward is to learn, discuss debate and decide how to proceed forward. The College in this regard should facilitate this.

Lastly numbers matter! There should be a lobbying power to influence authorities to provide adequate facilities to psychiatrists and teams to remain in the country to work with dignity and satisfaction.