

G R Handy Inaugural Oration

Late Dr G R Handy

Deshamanya Dr P R Anthonis

Journal of the Ceylon College of Physicians, 1996, 29/2, 67-70

It is an accepted tradition and norm that the first oration of an annual event in the name of an illustrious person should be entirely devoted to a summary of the life history of the distinguished person.

I am privileged this evening to carry out this responsibility. It is not an easy task to summarise, in an hour, the life history of a person who has spent a little more than 65 years of professional service out of his 93 years. It is not at all easy to pick out the relevant features that will give you a picture of Dr George Rajanayagam Handy, born this day 94 years ago – the year that Queen Victoria died after reigning for 63 years.

In our life's journey we meet many people of many different moulds who influence our lives in various ways and in varied intensities. Yet it is very rare to meet and know people who influence our lives in a lasting attachment and reciprocated friendship – still further cemented by similar intellectual pursuits. Their brilliant achievements display great talent in the field of their choice.

Though he was senior to me by almost a decade we were both caught up without being able to proceed to U.K. for higher studies for six long years owing to the outbreak of the Second World War. Then again we both returned – he as the first post-war physician and myself as the first post-war surgeon. Considering Dr Handy's brilliant achievement it is interesting and instructive to trace the steps by which he rose to this high academic position of a very superlative character. He belonged to an illustrious family in Jaffna where his father the late Rev. C.C. Handy was the first Ceylonese to act as Principal of St John's College, Jaffna during the years 1890 to 1892. Rev. Handy's devotion to duty, his firm commanding manner, his winning and pleasant ways, above all his noble Christian life, marked him as one of the best sons of Jaffna (From a tribute to Rev. Handy by William Wadsworth, former pupil and later district Judge). The name Handy has found a permanent place in St John's Jaffna. Handy House and the Handy Memorial Library were established in memory of Rev. C.C.

Handy, father of Dr Handy who died in 1908. The untimely death of Rev. Handy left the daunting task of bringing up six young children on their mother, a task made more difficult due to lack of funds. Fortunately Dr Handy received free education at both St John's College Jaffna and later at Trinity College, Kandy.

His mother, small in stature, was a loving kind gentle and beautiful lady with an inner charm which was hard to describe. However, what she lacked in stature she made up in her strong character. She disciplined her children with a firm hand. Her gentle nature showed through for, often, she too would be crying when she caned her children when they were naughty. Handy was boarded at Trinity College, Kandy during the latter part of the schooling. He said his mother would always be waiting for him at the front door, waiting to greet him back home for his vacation and again to wave goodbye when he left.

Handy always said that whenever he reflected on their early days and thought of his mother, his eyes filled with tears. In a tribute to his old school he says "Whatever success I have achieved in the medical profession is mainly due to the influence of my two mothers – my own dear mother and my alma-mater".

Life was very hard for the Handy's, his mother had to sell her jewellery and other items of value to tide over crisis such as sickness. His mother's father the Rev. John Backus was very supportive and a tower of strength to them. Being a priest himself, he could not help them financially. Handy described his grandfather as a kind and affectionate gentleman who helped them get through their hardship, shared in their triumphs and encouraging to do better. Handy was his grandfather's favourite and had many happy memories of him.

Handy was the youngest of four boys. Everything he had from clothes and books were passed down to him from his older brothers. In his own words, "my father died when I was five, my mother was poor, I used to envy the boys who crowded round the sweet sellers..."

On the brighter side, Handy was a brilliant student. The school prize giving used to be a momentous occasion for his mother. She, I was told, used to be seated in one of the front rows and received the many prizes awarded to him. He shuttled between the chief guest who was distributing the prizes and his very proud mother, who received the prizes from him. He would leave his prize on her lap and be off to collect the next. It was indeed a proud day for his mother.

Handy was no different to other little boys. He was naughty! He confessed that the drains at their home were well "oiled" because he meticulously tipped his daily dose of Cod Liver oil down the drain! On another occasion he was punished and was asked to stand in a corner, facing the wall for the morning. After a while, his mother feeling sorry for him, called off the punishment. He had said, that if he was asked to stand in the corner for the morning he would stand in the corner for the morning! He admitted that he had a stubborn streak. However he felt that this held him in good stead as he had the same stubborn determination to succeed despite all the problems and obstacles he had to overcome. He always kept in mind his old school motto "*Respice Finem*".

Handy continued his education at Trinity College, Kandy. Here too he was fortunate enough to have free education as his elder brother J.C. Handy, a brilliant mathematics lecturer was a teacher.

Despite his brilliant performance at school there was tremendous pressure on him to graduate and take to the teaching profession in order to help the family financially. He had set his mind on doing medicine and was very grateful to his eldest brother Rev. J.T.N. Handy who had said that..."If the boy wanted to do medicine, he should be allowed to do medicine". He was always very grateful to his brother for this opportunity and in the absence of a father looked up to his eldest brother as a father and was attached to him throughout his life.

Medical student

He joined the Medical College in 1922. He spent 5 years winning numerous medals and prizes as a medical student. He passed out in 1927 qualifying as Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (LMS) in 1927. During these 5 years he came first in order of merit at all examinations and won several Gold Medals.

Having finished his appointments at the General

Hospital Colombo and the Lying in Home he was appointed Lecturer-Demonstrator in Physiology at the Ceylon Medical College – 1936-37.

Here I quote the words of an article of the Ceylon Daily News of April 22, 1995 by Dr P. Sivasubramaniam also later the first post-war Ophthalmic Surgeon –

"The more clinical oriented aspects of physiology, circulatory, respiratory and the central nervous system were part of the syllabus apportioned to Dr Handy.

From start to finish, for 60 minutes (not more not less) Dr Handy would hold forth, explaining the nuances of physiology – the science of the process of life without a scrap of paper before him. His lectures on the central nervous system were the climax of his teaching art. The basic anatomical pathways in the central nervous system were lucidly explained and the recapitulation of the numerous eponymous centres nuclei and tracts were his forte." This was the most essential foundation for the future Physician-cum-Cardiologist.

In 1930 i.e. 3 years later there came to his life a devoted living and intelligent Kanmanie Strong, daughter of the Crown Counsel of Puttalam. His married life brought him happiness and great stability and she proved a very valuable and an understanding partner. No doubt she must have contributed enormously for his upliftment in his course of study. The couple was blessed with 3 children –

1. Daughter – Dr Kanthi Handy Phd, who looked after the father day and night during his last life and who is entirely responsible for the origin, concept and run of this oration.
2. Son – Dr Handy, Junior – Anaesthetist at Chemsford Hospital, London.
3. Son – Dr Associate Professor in Chemistry in Columbia University, South Carolina.

He proceeded to U.K. for post-graduate studies and obtained the honours degree in the London MBBS. He was awarded the Gold Medal in the DTM & H London. The outbreak of World War II September 1939 compelled them to return to Ceylon without completing the MRCP or the MD.

He and I both had to stagnate 6 years till the war finished. In 1942 he was appointed JMO in

Colombo. Soon he became an authority in Forensic Medicine and Pathology. He proceeded again to U.K. and obtained the MD (Lond) and MRCP (Lond). He also specialised in Cardiology. On his return to Ceylon he was appointed a Visiting Physician and worked with the Senior Physician Dr John Blaze.

In the 1950s (1953-55) he was conferred the OBE. He was President of the Ceylon Medical Association in 1963. The Presidential address he delivered was entitled "Some problems in the diagnosis and management of Ischaemic Heart Disease". The Presidential address was delivered on the 2nd of August 1963 and published in the Ceylon Medical Journal 1964 June-Sept. He was a lecturer at the Ceylon Academy of Postgraduate Medicine and was also a past-President.

The Ceylon Heart Association was founded in 1968 with him as the Founder-President.

He was elected Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in May 1970. He had recently attended the Asian Pacific Conference on Diseases of the Chest held in Japan. The Fourth Asian Conference of Cardiology, the Fifth European Congress of Cardiology in Athens and the Tenth International Congress of Diseases of the Chest in Washington, chairing some of the sessions. He also attended the Sixth World Congress of Cardiology in London.

In 1970 he was elected a Fellow of the American College of Cardiologists. Another paper "Physical activity in relation to health and disease" was published in *Trans Cey. College of Physicians* 1974.

He became the pioneer Cardiologist of this country. During the time of his tenure as visiting physician of the General Hospital, Colombo now the General Hospital brought him recognition as a very brilliant physician. He became very popular clinical teacher and very fair examiner in the final MBBS where he displayed unquestionable integrity. His practice embraced the whole Island from Jaffna to Dondra West Coast to the East Coast. His name became a household word. People of every community, every religion and every status flocked to him. He displayed great prowess in every field he selected. His diagnosis had to be made at the bedside of the patient as at that time there were no advanced modern sophisticated diagnostic aids that are available to the medicalmen of today, yet his scientific early training in physiology combined with his accurate observations made him a brilliant diagnostician. I could quote many baffling cases, yet

one case is unforgettable. A young lady, 25 years or so, caesarean section, first child. Five days later, continued fever, often chilly. lasted nearly 1 month and 2 weeks with para typhoid on 2 serological analyses at Durdans Hospital. Her relations insisted that Dr Handy should see her and after careful examination in spite of a positive blood test he made a contrary diagnosis and insisted that she should be operated that day itself that there was pus inside the peritoneal cavity. Operation revealed a bag of pus on the left side of the pelvis. Removal of this cured her completely within one week.

I can quote many many cases of such brilliant diagnosis. As a cardiologist after he retired from the G.H.C. and still engaged in active practice. I remember this well known case of a lady from Kalutara - 3 Cardiologists pronounced that no knife should be put as her heart condition would not permit even a minor operation. Dr Handy stood up and said "No she will stand it" and she did stand perfectly and his still living.

Though he was the most sought after physician of the day yet he attended to his family. His social aspect was equally astonishing. He somehow or other attended to all social calls - many many were his friends who trusted and sought his advice All accepted his advice without question, so great was the confidence people had on him.

Most brilliant people are often a little eccentric, live in a world of their own. Dr Handy was an exception. He had the time for his church and lived a true Christian life. Never spoke ill of his colleagues, never boasted, never retaliated when a jealous colleague spoke about him disparagingly. He maintained a dignified, silent, even tenor of life with an admirable dignity. He practised his profession almost to the last and when at least he was bed-ridden he never grumbled but bore up cheerfully and calmly and peacefully passed away almost at 93 years complete.

He participated in the meetings of the Clinical Society of the General Hospital, Colombo - Primarily meant for medical students, the Ceylon Medical Association, College of Physicians of Ceylon, the Academy of Postgraduate Medicine, all of which he was president. He also pioneered cardiology in Sri Lanka and was the founder president of the Sri Lanka Heart Association.

In addition, he took an active part in all the social activities of all the medical associations and one

must recall the signal service he did in maintaining the annual medical dance as the dance secretary. The Medical Dance was the number one social event at that time. G.R. Handy was known as George Rex, (Georges were the reigning monarchs of Britain and Ceylon) by medical students of six decades ago was indeed regal in appearance and he always said about "Man never dies, he commits suicide. He digs his grave with his teeth".

After the demise of Mrs. Handy, he was left alone, all the children been abroad. However his niece Ranji Senanayake wife of Hon. Maithripala Senanayake, Governor North Central Province stepped in and looked after Dr. Handy.

When he passed away I was at his bedside and I remember how the various events of so many years past flashed through my mind and I said to myself what a magnificent contribution to the welfare of the

people of this country with a perfect example of combination of great talents and good sober life – a combination of both precept and example.

Some of Dr Handy's sayings:-

- (1) "Prevention is better than cure".
- (2) "Eat your breakfast like a prince, share you lunch with a friend and give your dinner to your enemy"
- (3) The foundation for many diseases is often laid in the early years of life and preventible".

I am glad that his pupils adore him for his sincerity and progress and his dedicated devotion to work and I am sure all of you will be delighted to learn that in his name a ward is being donated to the Cardiology Unit of the National Hospital, Colombo.