

Inaugural Professor Kumaradasa Rajasuriya Oration

Lessons from history : The life of Prof. K Rajasuriya

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, The year 1995, among other things will go down as a landmark in the annals of medicine in our country. For it marks the completion of 125 years of the Colombo Medical School, founded in 1870. The Colombo Medical School has being fortunate to possess the finest possible teachers any University could wish for, making it the finest among Asia and in the Dominion territories.

The year is also notable for it marks the twentieth anniversary of the death of one of its outstanding scholars, who later made his mark as a brilliant clinical teacher, a Professor and a Health Administrator. That individual was Professor Kumaradasa Rajasuriya.

It is owing to the initiative and generosity of the family members of the late Professor Rajasuriya, that an endowment has been-made to commence an annual Oration, lest the memory of this illustrious teacher fade away.

As a student of the distinguished Professor, a friend and mentor in later years. I am indebted to the family members for the honour bestowed on me to deliver the Inaugural Oration.

Born on 2nd December 1915, Rajasuriya schooled at Ananda and later at Nalanda Vidyalaya, Colombo. His father Marshall Fernando Rajasuriya of Wekanda was a station master, and his mother Melgina Jayasekera of Nedimale. Marshall Fernando Rajasuriya brought forth seven children - four sons and three daughters. However they were all provided with a privileged education.

Rajasuriya, in the latter years, decided to present to the world at large his experiences and views on life in anecdotal form. It is from these scintillating accounts written in his inimitable style, that I have been able to piece together his life and times.

Memories of Rajasuriya's youth go back to the tender age of eight which left him with a permanent disability.

"I had a toss in school hitting my left knee heavily on a desk. After trying the usual home remedies and the local doctor, I was taken to see Dr. Richard Spittel. I could not walk due to the pain and swelling, so, Dr. Spittel came up to the car.

I was operated the next day, under the chloroform mask. I was afraid my left leg would be taken off. But when I came to, was relieved to find my left foot still there. I realised that my running, jumping and tumbling days were over.

Later when I was a medical student under Spittel, he recognised me as the little boy who made such a nuisance in the ward. For some time I went to school on crutches".

For Rajasuriya thereafter was called upon, now and then, to make a series of crucial decisions and it was nothing but destiny that placed him on the path to fame. The first of these came in 1933, when the world was in the throes of a depression.

"I had passed the Cambridge Senior with exemptions from the London Matriculation. I wanted to do Arts at the University hoping to get into the Civil Service.

But the Headmaster at Nalanda, my uncle, put paid to my ambitions of the Civil. He took the form and changed it to science subjects, virtually commanding me to do Medicine.

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In that year of 1933, I became a pre-medical student. As some of the subjects were totally new to me, I failed badly in Botany and Zoology. It was too late to repent and I went through it somehow. Three months later I managed to pass and in October of that year I joined the Medical College.

I am glad my uncle changed my subjects. Perhaps it was written in the stars, he was only the instrument”.

Illness dogged the young Rajasuriya from childhood, probably explaining his passionate devotion to the sick. From 13 onwards he developed attacks of fever and shivering.

‘This was thought to be filariasis, but treatment from several western qualified doctors did not cure me’, quotes Rajasuriya.

In the medical college while answering the Pharmacology paper he was subjected to an attack which seriously affected his performance. An Indian Swami, with a reputation for curing many an illness, which had defied several specialists, had arrived in the island. His father arranged to consult him.

“I first scorned the idea, being a western medicine man myself but as the Finals were approaching, I gave in.

He was a tall stately man dressed in saffron robes. All he did was to feel my pulses. He dictated some items of medicine to be taken with ghee and honey. I took them. I never had an attack of filariasis afterwards.

I have had a great respect for ayurveda since then”.

As a house officer Rajasuriya obtained an appointment with the Senior Physician, a much sought after job. However he had a disagreement with the Chief over a venesection in a man with hypertension and repeated nose-bleeds. The Chief, a well meaning man later made amends with an apology.

Rajasuriya’s own student days (1934-1939) was typical of what the young medico of that vintage era went through.

“When we entered the hallowed precincts of the medical college, we forked out the princely sum of rupees two as Poll Tax. With that sum we were given the first taste of ‘pol arrack’, and a week later we acolytes were cleansed both inside and outside at the Mahamoodiya Hotel in the Pettah. Several draughts of ambrosia were poured down.....

Rejoicing went on till early morning, at the end of which the only thing I remember is being bundled into a rickshaw and sent home”.

The Block years, although arduous provided the medico’s own brand of fun. There were body feeds, limb feeds and book feeds, in addition to guided missile practice with parts of the human body.

At the end of the second year those successful crossed the Kynsey Road to enter the holy of holies, the General Hospital.

“The clinicians were very strict. We had to be in by 7.15 and take over every aspect of patient care. There were only four of us in a batch, and we were always in the path of bullets that often came our way”.

The Professorial appointments then were not done in the final year. There were District Calls to deliver patients in their homes, also pharmacy classes and useful public health field visits.

There were hardy annuals which helped lighten the tough life of medicoes.

“The picnic to Kandy in 1937 ended in near disaster. A medico squirted the contents of a beer bottle into the Governor’s car, when its august occupant was riding in the back seat. It was the time of the Bracegirdle affair and the Government did not take well towards black shirts.

A van load of Police arrived and we were marched to the Police Station. Timely intervention of Dr. Rajasingham got us released”.

The Law-Medical match on the old SSC grounds enlivened the medicoes. The poster parade was the grand draw. Rajasuriya was joint Editor of the Magazine.

"Having committed an indiscretion in allowing a rather salacious joke to enter the magazine. I was summoned before the Council. But again the intervention of senior teachers saved our day.

Next day a poster appeared, WARNED AND DISCHARGED".

The Final exam was the last lap in the gruelling race. You had to have a First Class to get into the curative side. Rajasuriya was ill and could not get the signatures for enrolment. He ran the risk of being put into the Second Class group if he put off the exam.

"I pleaded with the Professor, a strong willed and hard man. Finally his good nature prevailed, he relented and signed me up. I was grateful to him. I got a First".

It was 1939, with the War clouds hanging over Europe, Rajasuriya left the Medical College.

"We severed our links with the medical college. We walked away with the feeling that we could hold our own with anyone produced by any other medical college anywhere".

The first outstation posting was to Murunkan. It was in 1943, the War was on. Hardly three months there when Rajasuriya had a cholera epidemic on his hands. It was, in his own words "a baptism of fire."

"Many cases of death from diarrhoea were being reported. We found a body of a vagrant by the wayside. I had never seen a case of cholera before. We took the body to a disused garage for a post mortem.

I put on heavy rubber gloves and overalls. Because the knife was slipping out of my hands I took them off. Until surgical gloves were being brought I opened a loop of small intestine with my bare hands. For the first time I saw what 'rice water stools' were, I had not taken the vaccine. That arrived a week later.

We had 30 cases of cholera, of which 30 died. Saline infusions were in short supply. We had to make up our supplies by dissolving NaCl tablets".

After Murunkan, Rajasuriya worked as Health Officer, Gampola and then as House Officer at the Childrens Hospital Colombo. He thereafter was posted to the Health Unit at Kalutara.

His final posting before leaving for postgraduate studies was Assistant Prisons Medical Officer.

"It was a very interesting and altogether a chastening experience. The life of a Prison's Doctor is not such a pleasant one, with many 'lifers' and violent men, also malingerers who wished to avoid work.

Twenty one years later I visited that institution, this time as Director of Health Services. The date was 8 April 1971. The place was full of injured insurgents. I ordered that they be looked after."

Then across the seas to sit the MRCP (London). It was 1951, he quotes.

"I opened the letter from the Royal College of Physicians. It was the call for the Final viva voce. I rang up a famous consultant who did coaching lessons. He declined. 'It is in the hands of God', he said, I went to brother man instead, a Ceylonese, W. D. Ratnavale, who kindly put me through my paces.

Came the day, and I paced up and down the Hall, trying to interest myself in portraits of past Presidents.

The porter, seated by the door, beckoned me.

"You will pass", he said

How he knew I never found out. I gave him a pound".

After success at the Membership examination, Rajasuriya obtained the Diploma in Child Health. He then took up a job at the famous Great Ormund Street Hospital for Sick Children, his Chief was Sir Wilfred Sheldon, later paediatrician to the Royal family Quotes Rajasuriya,

"I had always wanted to be a paediatrician, because children fascinated me. I spent some of the happiest days of my life in that institution where hard work was appreciated, and the colour of one's skin did not come into the reckoning. I was thrilled when the time came

to demonstrate cases during grand rounds. I demonstrated three cases, the diagnosis of which had escaped others".

Return to Ceylon and a tour of duty. It was 1953-54, Rajasuriya was Physician Jaffna, where he worked alongside our Chairman, Dr. P. Sivasubramaniam, Ophthalmic Surgeon.

Thereafter Rajasuriya moved onto Kurunegala as physician. That was where he made history by the use of young coconut water for intravenous infusions. Quotes Rajasuriya,

"I was working at the Childrens Hospital, Colombo during the war. Following the air raid in 1942, imports of medical supplies were much reduced. Intravenous fluids could not be obtained to combat many cases of diarrhoea and dehydration.

At about this time I read an article on the use of coconut water infusions in Cuba. I spoke of this to the Professor, but being a very conscientious and cautious man, he suggested waiting.

I got my chance some years later working in Kurunegala, where coconut palms were aplenty. With the collaboration of the paediatrician we gave the first trial infusion to a baby, who took it well. Thereafter we treated 26 patients and published the results".

The year 1955 was notable in the life of Kumaradasa Rajasuriya, for that was when he 'burst' upon the Colombo scene, first as Physician and later as Professor. The soft-spoken young physician made an immediate impression on his colleagues and students. The path seemed now to be open for fame and recognition, which did not take long to be realised. He possessed the two essential ingredients, that of accomplishment combined with force of character that magnetised those who came under his spell.

He was only 43 when he applied and was accepted as Co-Professor. In his own words,

"I became a member of the intellectual elite of the country. A short while later, I accompanied a friend who wanted to see a lady palmist, After

much persuasion he wanted my palm read. A 'promotion' was to come soon, she predicted. I was non-plussed as my Chief was quite a fit man. The other improbable 'promotion' I felt was that of Vice-Chancellor.

Within a few months her prediction came true, in a sad way of course, for my Chief was struck down by a sudden illness and forced to retire. I then became Professor of Medicine".

As the years went by, Rajasuriya settled well into the post that he never dreamt of reaching as a sick and disappointed youth. However his personality was sufficiently strong for many to take notice of his methods and his views, which he expressed fearlessly.

In 1962, he was offered a seat in the Upper House. Quotes Rajasuriya

"Came 1962, and several seats in the Senate were due to be filled. I was approached as a suitable person for one vacancy. I was very reluctant and said that my time as a medical man would be better spent in teaching and research.

I was quite relieved, for a few days later when a well known lawyer was found instead".

In 1967, malaria had raised its ugly head once more. A large number of cases were being admitted to the Colombo General Hospital. Quotes Rajasuriya,

"This was quite embarrassing at a time when malaria was claimed to be completely eradicated from the island. During a visit to Peradeniya, I found that a number of cases of Falciparum malaria were coming in from the outlying areas of Matale, Elahera and Minipe.

With the help of the G. A. Kandy and the Senior Lecturer, I decided to do something. We formed a team and established a camp at the Weragantota rest house. Each morning we left in a jeep and returned by nightfall, after visiting village cottages and bringing with us blood samples.

We stained the films and examined them in the courtyard in natural light. During our six day

outing we detected 50 cases of malaria. The G. A., concerned that an epidemic would affect paddy cultivation, requested that we put down our findings.

A second team, from my department in Colombo, visited other parts of the country and found the situation fast deteriorating. We wrote a letter to the then Prime Minister, Mr. Dudley Senanayake, on 17 January 1968. Then on 30 January prompt action was taken, and a grave epidemic of malaria was averted."

Rajasuriya was the recipient of the Senior Commonwealth Fellowship in May 1966, which took him to University College Hospital, London. It was a reunion with old friends, Sir Max Rosenheim and his former Chief, Sir Wilfred Sheldon. A part of the tenure of Fellowship was at Cornell Medical Centre in N. Y.

In September 1969, Rajasuriya experienced at first hand the teaching methods in Soviet medical schools and the preventive aspects of medicine. This was made possible under the auspices of the Lanka-Soviet Friendship Society.

We now come to that chapter in the life of Rajasuriya which made him deliberate on a change of life. It was not an easy decision and when he took the bold step, he as well as his close friends, had many reservations on its final outcome. For him, it was crossing the Rubicon. Quotes Rajasuriya,

"Eight years after I declined a seat in the Upper House, I was urged to accept the post of Director of Health Services. I accepted the invitation, although some of my friends dissuaded me. But most of them thought there was no harm in taking it.

I was interviewed and appointed D. H. S. on 18.10.70. I received warm greetings from Lord Rosenheim, and an old pupil who welcomed the idea, adding that, being critical in outlook and with on vested interests, I would succeed".

Some of the tasks Rajasuriya undertook, now at the helm of both curative and preventive services, was an investigation into alleged drug shortages. He attended the World Health Assembly in Geneva in May 1971, at which a ban on smoking was enforced for the first time. Quotes Rajasuriya,

"On my return, I decided that the ban should be enforced here, starting with my office. It didn't work".

When the local insurrection broke out in April 1971, there were many police and service personnel warded in the Accident Service. Quotes Rajasuriya,

"The staff, both major and minor, rose magnificently to the occasion and did an excellent job. But there were intimidatory telephone calls, with threats of bombing the Accident Service. I decided to bed down in the hospital with the others, to raise their morale. I slept on a mattress on the floor, and ate the food normally served to hospital patients.

The night passed without incident. There were no more bomb threats.

During his tenure of Directorship, he noticed that whenever the need arose to appoint a team of experts, everybody went for European experts. This became obvious when we needed experts to advise on malaria control. The names of three Europeans were submitted. Quotes Rajasuriya,

"I emphasised that there were experts in this country who knew as much about malaria as anyone else, and at least two of the experts should be from here".

However at the end of his term of office, he was a very disappointed man. In his own words.

"It was two years in the wilderness. I was glad to return to teaching and research. I relinquished the post in Oct. 1972".

What are our recollections, myself and that of colleagues, who clerked under Professor Rajasuriya? Yes, those were the days: rigid and demanding by present day standards, incomparable to any other appointment during the gruelling five years. Yet memorable, exhilarating, nevertheless the most rewarding exercise for posterity.

His presence was a natural phenomenon in the wards. He brought with him an aura of sanctimony to clinical medicine. He drilled us students in the very basics that went to make a diagnosis. He enthralled listeners with the finer points of diagnosis and

galvanised the sluggish ones with his special brand of wit and sarcasm. That he was the archetypal bedside physician there was no doubt, for his system of teaching demanded very little by way of finances, gadgetry and showmanship.

We were to retain these qualities, then later and decades afterwards. They have stood the test of time.

Remembering Rajasuriya would not be complete unless mention is made of the M. D. examination, which he willed himself to conduct at the highest possible level. This is what Lord Rosenheim once declared:

"Your degree of M. D. is awarded on the results of a very searching examination, the standards not differing from the London Membership. We place Australia, New Zealand and Ceylon on the top bracket. I hold your M. D. in very high esteem".

His devotion to the task was monumental, his integrity supreme, he pursued his mission to the last breath, for he collapsed and passed away in the midst of that examination.

A stickler for routine, a hard taskmaster, yet Rajasuriya was capable of a warm friendship. He often accompanied his students on outings, riding

in the same bus, eating the same food, listening to the saucy limerics of the medico of yesteryear.

His research interests were wide and pertained to clinical topics. In 1970 he delivered the Sir Marcus Fernando Oration. He was for sometime Editor of the Ceylon Medical Journal.

His was a forceful personality, fearless and forthright in his opinions. An undeniable feature of his life was his strong views on nationalism, culture and religion. He thus remained to the end a controversial figure, for his strong loves and hates displeased some. But even his greatest adversary would not doubt his transparent honesty.

When his death was announced, a stunned silence prevailed among the medical fraternity, the corridors of the General Hospital and the students, who felt a great void in their young lives, for a Guru had passed into the realm beyond.

Beneath the face of a distinguished doctor, Kumaradasa Rajasuriya was the ensemble of accomplishment, learned, highly cultured and a patriot to the end.

For there passed from our presence, on 2nd January 1975, a distinguished son of Sri Lanka.

The like of him we shall never see again!