



Obituary



Vasantha Muthuswamy (1948-2023)

Vasantha Muthuswamy, the best-known face of bioethics in India, died on 21 February 2023 in Mumbai, surrounded by the family she loved. She was 74.

Dr Vasantha was almost legendary among bioethicists. She was respected for her wisdom and vast knowledge. She was a pioneer and intellectual leader in bioethics, she put India on its global map.

In recognition of her contributions to the development of bioethics in India, Vasantha was conferred Lifetime Achievement Awards by the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, Indian Society for Clinical Research, Centre for Ethics, Yenepoya University and The Forum for Ethical Review Committees in the Asian and Western Pacific Region (FERCAP). She was a sought-after speaker in conferences and had delivered innumerable talks, orations and keynote addresses on bioethics and allied areas in national and international meetings.

We had a long and close association with her spanning several decades, and known her both as a colleague and a mentor. We will miss her dearly. We celebrate not only the years in her life but also the life in those years.

Vasantha started her career at the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Headquarters, New Delhi, in July 1983, when she joined as Senior Research Officer in the Division of Basic Medical Sciences (BMS). She would spend the next 25 yr in the Division moving through ranks to become Senior Deputy Director General. She led the Division of BMS as its Chief for 18 yr before superannuating in 2008.

The turning point of her professional life was in 1997 when she went on a WHO-Fellowship to the Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Upon return, Vasantha played a key role under the guidance of Hon'ble Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah in preparing the revised '*Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research on Human Subjects*' released in 2000. She saw these guidelines as living documents and had revised them from time to time in light of the new developments in the field of science and technology. The next revision was released in 2006. Although she had superannuated from the ICMR, her expertise was utilized by roping her in as Chair of the Ethics Advisory Group to guide the 3rd revision, which took the *avatar* of the *National Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical and Health Research involving Human Participants*, 2017.

She made great strides in furthering the development of all disciplines under BMS such as stem cell research, genomics, drug development, adverse drug reactions, clinical pharmacology, bio-informatics, traditional systems of medicine, and haemoglobinopathies. Under her leadership, the division of BMS even set up a Medical Innovation Fund. She took care of the administrative and scientific interests of the Institutes at the ICMR Headquarters, namely the National Institute of Pathology, National Institute of Immunohaematology and the Regional Medical Research Centre, Belgaum, which she revived and the Centre at Belgaum was finally established in 2006 as an Institute (now renamed as the National Institute of Traditional Medicine). She was always very supportive and helpful to them. She positively argued their each issue based on sound logic, pushing back on judgemental opinions, steering clear of emotions and biases.

Dr Muthuswamy got unwavering support, encouragement and guidance from Prof N K Ganguly, DG-ICMR (1998-2007). He remembers her as a person who not only framed the ICMR's ethical guidelines but also she lived them. 'She was a person with conviction. Even when she was sick, she discharged her responsibilities conscientiously, never acknowledging defeat. She was a colleague whom you could trust completely. She shared her knowledge with no strings attached. Her life was very unassuming and easy. She had a very positive attitude. Her death is a huge loss to the Nation'.

Judiciously utilizing the opportunities that the WHO-Fellowships provided for training, she got a critical mass of people also from the ICMR Headquarters trained in bioethics at some of the best institutions. Her efforts paved the way for the setting up of an ICMR Bioethics Unit. It has blossomed to be a part of the Global Network of WHO Collaborating Centres for Strengthening Ethics - the first centre in the WHO South-East Asia Region. Even after her superannuation, the ICMR Bioethics Unit maintained a close association with her till her last days. During the recent SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, Vasantha helped formulate national guidelines for ethics committees to review COVID-19 research. She guided organizing a large number of workshops for their dissemination across the country.

Prof P.N. Tandon, former Head, Neurosurgery at AIIMS, worked with Vasantha for more than a decade,

initially as a member and later as the Chairperson of the Central Ethics Committee on Human Research of the ICMR and of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the division of BMS. Recalling his association with her, he said, She provided unparalleled support to the committee throughout her professional career earlier (in 2000 and 2006) as an anchor and later (in 2017) as Chair of the Ethics Advisory Group. She initiated the program for capacity building in biomedical ethics in the country which she passionately followed even after her superannuation. It is a matter of great personal grief for me to learn about the sad demise of Dr Vasantha Muthuswamy. The country has lost an outstanding scientist and I personally, a remarkable human being.

Her fame as a bioethicist had spread far and wide. Not only was she associated with the development of guidelines in India but also was invited overseas to formulate similar guidelines, *e.g.* Operational Guidelines for Ethics Committees that review Biomedical Research, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2000; Ethical guidelines on Biomedical and Behavioural Research on HIV/AIDS, 2001 (WHO SEARO); Guidelines for Data Safety Monitoring Board, WHO, Geneva, 2003; Ethical Considerations in Biomedical HIV Prevention Trials, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2007; and HIV Prevention Trials Ethics Guidance for Research, FHI (NIH), USA, 2009. Nepal, Thailand and Sri Lanka invited her to develop their Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research.

She was the Founding Secretary of the FERCAP for 10 yr, served as a FERCAP Steering Committee Member and set up its Indian Chapter - Forum for Ethics Review Committees in India. She was its current President (since 2010). Dr Juntra Karbwang-Laothavorn, Clinical Coordinator at WHO-TDR (1998-2012) and the present President, FERCAP, has known Dr Vasantha for a long period. Paying tribute to her Dr Juntra said, 'We have lost a giant in the health research ethics community. She was our FERCAP local coordinator for India. Her contributions to promoting health research ethics, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, cannot be overstated enough. We mourn with her family and friends'.

In addition to being Chair of the ICMR's Central Ethics Committee in Human Research, she presided over dozens of National and International Ethics Review Committees. Although not in the pink of her health, she continued to guide several universities (like Ashoka) and institutions in drafting their Standard

Operating Procedures even in between her treatment sessions.

She came to meetings fully prepared; reading all background documents carefully. She used the highlighter liberally. Dr Vasantha passionately defended the activities, budget and the staff of the Division. She had elephantine memory and remembered all facts and figures. On many occasions, when we had drafted ICMR documents and wanted critical feedback, we called on Vasantha. We could count on her to read the write-ups carefully and respond thoughtfully and honestly. We highly valued her comments.

She had a charismatic personality, displayed social and leadership skills and demonstrated warmth and competence. She was delightfully engaging. Her passion, drive and moral commitment was inspiring. She came across as trustworthy and friendly. She spoke with controlled passion and authoritative tone. Her voice carried far and she made herself heard in every corner of the room. She seemed younger than her years but wiser for her age.

She was a natural and gifted teacher. She would often say in training workshops, 'build your skills not your cv'. She would go to great length to explain issues and this also spilled into her day-to-day dealing with people. Some of us were very hesitant to call her during her illness as she would talk herself into exhaustion.

Vasantha exercised restraint and did no harm. She strived to make things better for everyone. She shunned behaviour that violated another person's rights. She was fair in giving others their dues. She understood well the difference between 'what you have a right to do and which is right to do'. Her motherly attitude touched lives of innumerable persons and she treated people with love and affection. She was gracious and compassionate. In some regions, affectionately called *Akka* (Kannada word for elder sister), she was a warm and very caring human being who went out of the way to help people. True to her name, Vasantha (Sanskrit word for the spring season) brought new life, cheer and happiness in peoples' lives. In her death, people grieved as if had lost a family member.

Vasantha was the eldest of the five children that Shri R. Seetharaman and Shrimati Tirupura Sundari had. She studied at St Raphael's Girls Higher Secondary School in Madras (now known as Chennai) and always stood

first in class and received scholarships. She was an all-rounder throughout excelling in sports (a badminton champion), academics and extracurricular activities.

Dr Vasantha obtained her MBBS degree and Diploma in Gynaecology and Obstetrics from R G Kar Medical College, Calcutta, and did MD in 1979 from the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Madras. Soon after completion of MBBS, she successfully competed for the coveted ICMR National Talent Search Scheme Fellowship (1975-1979). So strong was her commitment to the ICMR that except for a brief period (about three and a half years) when she moved to be with her husband, Prof M. Muthuswamy, who taught Political Science and Constitutional Law at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration - a civil services training institute on public policy and administration in Mussoorie, she devoted her entire professional life of over four decades working with the ICMR.

Vasantha was predeceased, in August 2013 by her husband Shri M. Muthuswamy whom she married in 1979, and is survived by her son Mahesh, two sisters and a brother.

In Vasantha's death, our country has lost a great bioethicist. That loss, thankfully, is not absolute. The legacy of Dr Vasantha Muthuswamy will continue to influence Indian science and medicine. We owe her a debt of gratitude in propelling the teaching, training and practice of bioethics in India to the next level.

Acknowledgment: We are grateful to many of Dr Vasantha Muthuswamy's contemporaries who have generously shared their recollections about her (Arun Sharda, Bela Shah, Dipika Mohanty, G S Sandhu, Mukesh Kumar, Nandni Kumar, R Ravi, Sanjiva Kholkute, Sunita Saxena and many others).

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