

Obituary



Dr Vasanthapuram Kumaraswami (1950-2016)

Vasanthapuram Kumaraswami, the *ajatashatru* (one who has no enemies) is no more. A tragic accident on Chennai-Bengaluru highway put an end to a life of service, compassion, caring and dedication on March 4, 2016. Also killed in the car crash were his wife Lakshmi and mother Kamala.

Second eldest of seven children, born to Shri Balasubramanian, an eminent lawyer, and Shrimati Kamala in Kavali in Andhra Pradesh, Kumaraswami studied in Madras Christian College High School in Chennai. Stanley Medical College was his *alma mater* from where he graduated as a young doctor in 1975 and also obtained MD in general medicine. He earned the membership of the National Academy of Medical Sciences in 1979. In 1994, Kumaraswami was awarded Ph.D. degree from University of Madras, and conferred the Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 2009. Kumaraswami was fortunate to have had Dr K. V. Thiruvengadam, an eminent physician and Professor of Medicine as his guide and mentor, from whom he imbibed methodical patient-centric approach, strict adherence to medical ethics and willingness to share knowledge *ad lib*, all of which he practiced throughout his life. He had been selected as an ICMR Talent Scholar soon after graduation. He was *crème de la crème*. He joined Tuberculosis Research Centre (TRC), Chennai (later renamed National Institute for Research in Tuberculosis, NIRT) of the ICMR in 1978. Dr S P

Tripathy, the then Director of TRC assigned him to work on pulmonary eosinophilia and lymphatic filariasis.

In the following years the studies on lymphatic filariasis (LF) were expanded from Tamil Nadu to other endemic areas, including Kerala and Odisha. Kumaraswami and Dr Eric Ottesen of National Institute of Health, USA, worked as a team and their combined efforts resulted in several collaborative studies in the three States. Their efforts met with spectacular success in epidemiology, immunology and chemotherapy and provided the basis for filariasis control in India. Dr Tripathy, who later became Director General of the ICMR remembers that, “country owes a lot to Kumaraswami in helping in the elimination of the bulk of filariasis and elephantiasis problem”.

Kumaraswami was roped in by the WHO/TDR (Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases) to help in filariasis. He contributed to the founding of the Global Programme to Eliminate Filariasis. He provided the drive behind much of what went on in global research agenda on filariasis. He implemented a number of studies in India and other endemic countries through the WHO/TDR.

VK, as he was affectionately called, was among the first in the world to evaluate the impact of ivermectin on LF. As one of the stalwart advocates for the Global Programme, he convinced policymakers to initiate and

expand the nascent mass drug administration programme in India and the entire South-East Asia Region. VK had a special skill of transforming technical and policy information into precise messages that everybody could understand. He had a good business sense for getting things done. He seemed to know all the right people. On his death the WHO posted on its website, "His death is an irreparable loss to the entire global neglected tropical diseases community". He guided scores of young professionals to undertake filariasis research and, with the help of colleagues, planned and implemented path breaking research studies on treatment, pathology and morbidity management of LF.

VK had a tremendous sense of humour, and once made a scientific presentation at the Journal club of the TRC supported with charts and tables, of a new viral disease, which he called HIV-3. It was only much later that the audience realized that it was April Fool's day. Able to see the funny side in any serious situation and often this facet helped him to deal with difficult situations with wisdom and equanimity. Never lost his cool in the most trying of circumstances and provided exemplary leadership in the last few years of service with the ICMR when he shouldered the onerous responsibilities of Director-in-Charge of two of the largest ICMR institutes at Chennai, the NIRT and the National Institute of Epidemiology simultaneously. Dr Soumya Swaminathan, current Director-General, ICMR and Secretary, Department of Health Research, has been a colleague of Kumaraswami since 1992 at TRC, remembers him as "one of the most brilliant people I have met, with a sharp, analytical mind and a keen sense of enquiry. This was complemented by a wonderful sense of humour and deep humility and grace - a truly unique combination of traits".

Following his voluntary retirement from the ICMR, he divided his time between his children and grandchildren (who got most of it) and LF, shuttling between the USA, and India. VK remained active in the cause to which he has been devoted for well over four decades: the hope of getting the world rid of lymphatic filariasis. He continued working tirelessly dedicating two years of service to The Task Force for Global Health, Atlanta, USA, as Associate Director International Programmes. He also helped NTD (Neglected Tropical Diseases) Programmes, at RTI, RT Envision Washington DC. Condoling his death a spokesperson of the organization said that "Every so often the world

is touched by individuals whose technical brilliance is matched by a genuine affection for people and a commitment to service; whose personal success is accompanied by a quiet humility and unassuming charity; whose patience and dedication inspires those around them. Dr Kumaraswami was just such a man, and our community is the lesser for his passing". No matter where he worked, he left an indelible mark.

Who can forget his frankness, his cordiality, his honesty, the absence of all disguise. Till his death VK remained the same – a simple, sincere person, and an affectionate and unconditional friend.

Dr Eric Ottesen with whom he had 'shared' 40 years of his life, remembers him through his long career with ICMR, and *via* all the work he did on filarial diseases with WHO and so many other international programmes targeting neglected diseases and the neglected populations suffering from them. Anguished at his death Eric, now Director of Global Task Force's Neglected Tropical Diseases Support Centre writes, "What he taught - or 'shared with' - me over the years about caring for patients, caring for colleagues, undertaking challenges, exercising leadership, displaying trust, maintaining tranquillity and - dare I say it? - still *beating the system* (without the system's ever feeling beaten!) is all part of his wisdom that I treasure and that I know is equally recognized and treasured by all who had the good fortune to know and work with him".

Though short in height, he was towering in impact. His presence in the room was felt. Remaining steadfast in his quiet perseverance while preserving tranquillity and trust in those around him.

A constant companion of VK was a book. A voracious reader he could read several books simultaneously. A little known fact about VK is that he used to paint - an artist of exceptional merit, a hobby that he had hoped to spend considerable time on after retirement. He was also technologically gifted and computer savvy. He was the first to introduce computers at TRC (as early as the 1980s) when computers were still a rare commodity. The introduction of new technology always excited him.

He was the ultimate family man, a devoted husband to his dear wife Lakshmi, and caring son to his mother Kamala. His daughter Manjusha and son Sameer are settled in the USA. In the last few years

his professional commitment was rivalled only by his attachments to his grandchildren. They were the centre of Kumaraswami's universe. He doted on them.

He often talked of his hopes of eliminating filariasis from the world within his lifetime. While that dream may not have been realized, Kumaraswami has left a legacy that all those involved in LF elimination will long remember. His optimism was contagious. We all will miss his passion, his intellect, his guidance, and of course his smile.

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