The incident at Galle Hospital, 1976

In 1976, I was the Medical Superintendent (MS) of General Hospital, Galle, which was then in Mahamodera.

On the evening of the 10 March 1976, I was at home ready to go to hospital for transcendental meditation (TM). Among the others who were in the meditation group were Dr D N Atukorale, Dermatologist, and Dr Reggie Goonetilleke, Dental Surgeon. At about 6.30 pm 'Podi Malli' rushed to my house (which was a stone's throw from the hospital). He was very angry. He told me that their patient in the labour room (LR) was very ill, but there was no doctor. I knew 'Podi Malli' as a prominent thug in the area who was from the Abeysekara family. However, I had a certain relationship with them.

I rushed to the hospital. At the bottom of the stairs leading to the LR there was a vociferous crowd. I walked into the LR and found that the patient was dead. She had died of penicillin hypersensitivity.

A few minutes later a minor employee rushed to the LR and told me that Dr P S Perera (PS), Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, was being assaulted. I rushed down and saw PS being assaulted with hands. The crowd recognised me and allowed me to rescue him and take him upstairs. I made PS sit in an annexe to the LR.

Meanwhile, my TM friends Atu and Reggie came to the LR and met PS and me. We told them to inform the Police as the mob was now at the door of the corridor leading to the LR. I was afraid to get a call to the police through the hospital exchange, because I knew that Abeysekara's people were manning the exchange. Policemen from the Police post came to the LR. They did not attempt to disperse the mob. They went back to the Police post. Dr P Amath, Medical Officer of Health, Galle Municipality came and promised to inform the Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP).

Suddenly the mob forced open the door of the LR. The leader was the elder Abeysekara, former hospital employee, former Deputy Mayor of Galle, and Sri Lanka Freedom Party Organiser for Galle. He wanted to see the patient. I told him that the patient had died of penicillin hypersensitivity. He was angry. He wanted to see the Bed Head Ticket (BHT). I had no choice but to give it. He found that a sensitivity test had been done and it had been negative. He shouted that they were forged records. He wanted to take the BHT away. However, I was able to get it back from him. He wanted an immediate inquest and went back with the mob.

About half-an-hour later the mob came back again. This time they were more violent. They were looking for PS. They wanted to kill him. They had been told where he was. They wanted to enter the annexe and I tried to prevent it. I was pushed aside. They pushed the door open. Luckily, PS who had heard the commotion had got on to the window and gone down the gutter. The mob saw that he was running away. They ran back looking for him. I also ran with them. On the way I ran to the Head Overseer's

office with the idea of calling the police post. As I raised the receiver it was grabbed from me and I was assaulted with hands. The elder Abeysekara saw what was going on. He shouted at them 'Do not assault the MS'. The assault stopped. I told him to save PS' life.

Just then Dr Joe Fernando, Superintendent of Health Services (SHS) came with the ASP. We went to my office. The elder Abeysekara wanted the body released immediately. We explained to him that an inquest is necessary. He undertook to get down the Coroner forthwith.

The Coroner who was a Gampaha Siddha Ayurveda doctor came immediately. He saw the dead body in the LR and opined that the baby inside (the woman was dead for about 4 hours) is still alive. The Abeysekaras demanded the delivery of the baby by Caesarean section. We were helpless even in the presence of the ASP. I had to ask the resident obstetrician, Dr Rohan Perera, to do the section. He did the section. There was a loud cheer that the baby was alive, but it was a false alarm.

Meanwhile, PS was pushed into our room. He was bleeding from the nose. He had sought refuge under a bed in the *Bhikku* ward. However, he had been found and mercilessly assaulted till he confessed that the death of the patient was due to his fault.

By now it was nearly midnight. A large number of policeman were in the hospital, but when I wanted to take my car away the mob blocked it. Luckily 'Podi Malli' allowed me safe passage home. As usual, I came for work next morning. The house officers did not come, but some specialists came to their rest room. They said that they were not working because of fear. I telephoned Mr. George Rajapakse, Minister of Health, who happened to be a relation and a family friend. He understood the gravity of the situation and promised to take action. The doctors were by now gathered in the house officers' quarters. The GMOA and local police hierarchy were there. The elder Abeysekara came. He demanded that the doctors go back for work. However, the doctors decided not to do so till the culprits were apprehended and till they felt safe. All hospital staff joined in the boycott. The next day the SHS and I discharged some patients, some discharged themselves, and others were transferred to Matara and Kalutara hospitals. The hospital was closed. Death threats came to the house officers in the quarters. If they did not resume work they were to be attacked. They vanished from the quarters. I got messages threatening me, asking me to get the doctors back to work.

Meanwhile, PS and I were given armed police protection. I received a warning from a reliable source that after the funeral of the patient the next afternoon, a mob would attack my house. This made me get a lorry, pack household goods, and leave Galle with my children by 5.00 am the next day. Later I heard that Atu, Reggie, and Sidney Ediriweera, (Orthopaedic Surgeon) had also left Galle with their families.

The Galle police were inactive about apprehending the culprits. The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) and the Association of Medical Specialists (AMS) demanded from the Minister of Health that action be taken to apprehend the culprits and to protect the staff of the hospital. The Minister took the correct stand. He later told parliament that, as far as he was concerned, he will not tolerate any kind of thuggery against doctors or any other hospital staff (1).

The Criminal Investigations Department (CID) was brought in. Ten doctors from the Army Volunteer Medical Corps took over the hospital few days after it was closed, but they looked after emergencies only. The OPD was closed (2). The GMOA and the AMS held a joint meeting on 21 March. They made a series of demands from the Minister of Health. As the Minister acceded to most of the demands the GMOA advised the doctors to report for work on 23 March.

Once I left Galle I stayed with my in-laws in the deep south. I refused to come to the Ministry for discussions. I was not sure of my future plans. I asked my wife who was abroad to return. I came out of the house only on the 20 March, to travel to Katunayake Airport to meet my wife. I spoke at the joint GMOA and AMS meeting on the 21 March, and went down south again. Later, my wife and I

met the Minister of Health. He persuaded me to resume duties in Galle. I did so on condition that I will be given a transfer if I find that the working conditions were unsatisfactory in Galle. Within a month, I came on transfer to General Hospital, Colombo.

The CID apprehended 26 suspects. A case was filed against 17 people. The proceedings which commenced in Magistrate's Court, Galle, was transferred to the District Court, Colombo. The charges against the accused consisted of nine counts relating to unlawful assembly, grievous hurt, simple hurt etc. The first and second accused (the Abeysekaras) were found guilty of unlawful assembly and causing grievous hurt to Dr P S Perera while being members of an unlawful assembly. On 7 April 1977, the first accused 'Podi Malli' was sentenced to three years' rigorous imprisonment and the second accused, the elder Abeysekara was sentenced to two years' rigorous imprisonment suspended for five years' (3). The first accused appealed. Later, President J R Jayawardena pardoned them.

References

1. Ceylon Daily News, 27 March 1976.
2. Ceylon Daily News, 15 March 1976.
3. Ceylon Daily News, 8 April 1977.

Lucian Jayasuriya, Medical Advisor, GlaxoSmithKline, Sri Lanka.