Appreciation

W A Karunaratne MD (Lond.) FRCP (Edin.) DPH (Lond.) FRSH

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Dr W A Karunaratne, a colossus of the health service during his time, passed away recently. He was 91 years of age. He used to describe himself as the oldest mobile medical officer in Sri Lanka. Even at this age he actively participated in medical gatherings, especially at those organised by the Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA). His intellect was clear, memory was good and voice vibrant. He was forthright in his views.

He had his education at St Aloysius College, Galle, University College Colombo, and the Ceylon Medical College. He started his career in the Sri Lankan government health service in 1935, after obtaining the Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery. In 1937 he was appointed Field Medical Officer, Malaria Control at Weeraketiya. He was MOH Padukka from 1938 to 1945. There, he was in charge of sanitary learners ie. today’s trainee public health inspectors. He had enjoyed his work very much during this period. He was happy to talk about his days at Padukka.

In 1947 he was awarded study leave for 3 years in the UK, for postgraduate qualifications in public health and state medicine. He studied at the Postgraduate Medical School, London (1947-48) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (1948-49). During this short period, he obtained the MBBS (London) (1947), MRCP (Edin.) (1948), DPH (London) (1949), and MD (London) (1949), and also toured extensively to study health services. He was elected FRCP (Edin.) in 1953 and FRSH in 1955.

He was Medical Officer, International Health (1950-53), Deputy Director, Public Health Services (1953-59), and Director of Health Services (1959-63). He was Director of Health Services at a time when the Head of the Department had power and responsibility. Unlike today, few decisions were made above him by the Ministry or the Minister. He had an intimate knowledge of the health service, as he found time to tour the country for a week on a regular basis and visit health institutions from the smallest to the biggest. During these tours he completed his inspection notes, disciplinary orders etc, so that he had little to follow up when he returned to his office. Files left his office the same day or next morning. He had time to play tennis every evening.

He represented Ceylon at many international meetings, including the World Health Assembly from 1950 to 1962. He was also a member of the Executive Board of the World Health Organization (WHO).

He was President of the Society of Medical Officers of Health (1954/55 and 1958/59); President, Section A of the Ceylon Association for the Advancement of Science (1958); President, Ceylon Public Health Association (1959/60): President, Ceylon Medical Association (1960); President, Ceylon Medical Council (1959-64).

He was a visiting lecturer and examiner at the Ceylon Medical College and later the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ceylon. He has published widely in national and foreign journals on subjects ranging from infant and maternal mortality, immunisation, health education, smallpox, malaria, filariasis, housing, heart disease, hospital as a centre of preventive medicine, dental services, mental health services, and health services management. He was a contributing author for the book ‘Modern Concepts of Health Management’ published by W B Saunders in 1961. In 1961 he published a book for the public called ‘You and Your Heart’. This book was updated recently by the Colombo Plan Association.

While he was Director of Health Services the WHO offered him the post of WHO Representative in Liberia and Sierra Leone. He used to say that he and his wife had a wonderful time there from 1964 to 1970. From 1970 to 1973
he was WHO Health Planning Consultant in Zambia. He was proud of the 10-year health plan that he helped produce for that country.

In 1975 he returned to Sri Lanka. It is during this period that he was President of the Health Department Sports Club for many years. He resuscitated a dying club. He played tennis daily till about five years ago.

Dr. Karunaratne spent his money on many social service activities. He built a Central Dispensary in his village, Kamburugamuwa. He later expanded this to a hospital. He made donations to the Colombo Friend in Need Society for rehabilitation of the Transit Hostel for the disabled. He donated his books to the Sri Lanka Medical Library, where they are kept in a cupboard named after him. The auditorium of the Health Department Sports Club is named after him in recognition of his services and donations to the club.

I consider it a blessing to have been a friend of a great gentleman of an earlier generation; a man I admired; a man of convictions; an outspoken man who loved and served his country well, and a man who was well recognised in the arena of international public health. My sympathies are with his constant companion and loving wife Majorie, and his three children.

Lucian Jayasuriya