Dr. Ponniah Sivasubramaniam, FRCS

Dr. Ponniah Sivasubramaniam was born in 1916 at Kaddudai, Jaffna. After an illustrious and rewarding life he was called away by his maker a few weeks ago.

Dr. Sivasubramaniam had his early education at St. Patrick's College, one of the prestigious schools in Jaffna. He matriculated in 1934, and soon after gained entrance to St. Joseph's College, Colombo. In 1936 he entered the Ceylon Medical College, the only medical school in Ceylon at that time. In 1941 he obtained the Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (L.M.S.) being placed in the first class with a distinction in Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

During his professional career he was a pioneer and trail-blazer. In 1947 he passed the primary FRCS when it was held for the first time in Ceylon. He was the first to qualify FRCS (Eng) in ophthalmology from this country. The Sri Lanka Medical Association since its inception in 1887 has had only two eye surgeons as presidents, Dr. Andreas Nell in 1924 and Dr. Sivasubramaniam in 1975. Dr. Sivasubramaniam was a founder member of the Ceylon Ophthalmological Association in 1957. This was upgraded to the College of Ophthalmologists in 1992 and Dr. Sivasubramaniam was its founder President.

As President of the SLMA in 1976, he was responsible for many welcome changes. He streamlined the steering committee organising the annual academic sessions, assigning specific functions to each of its members. He also insisted on careful evaluation of the papers submitted before acceptance. This raised the standard of the annual sessions, which continues to improve. He initiated the concert as a social event produced and performed by members and their families. This continues to be an attraction at our annual sessions. He donated a handsome upholstered carved chair for use by the President, which still adorns the Council room. He authored and published a Students' Companion in Ophthalmology. He has over fifty publications in ophthalmology in local and foreign journals. He was awarded the prestigious S. C. Paul Oration at the SLMA annual sessions 1967. He was the Chairman of the Asia Pacific Academy of ophthalmology at the annual sessions in 1974, and was the recipient of the coveted Jose Ridal Medal for his services to ophthalmology in the region. He edited the Ceylon Medical Journal from 1961 to 1964.

He motivated the authorities of that time for a better and larger eye hospital. He was closely involved in planning and equipping it. The present eye hospital which resulted is to a great extent attributable to his efforts.

Dr. Sivasubramaniam was a gifted teacher and many of the present day eye surgeons have been his pupils at one time or other. He was always elegantly attired and well-groomed, soft-spoken, and the epitome of equanimity, never seen to burst out in loud laughter or grimace or even frown when angry. By example he inspired junior doctors and nursing staff with his quiet, efficient, courteous and caring attitude towards patients.

Dr. Sivasubramaniam soon after he returned from UK having qualified FRCS was posted as eye surgeon Jaffna General Hospital (1950). His pioneering work is still described in glowing terms. He revived the Jaffna Clinical Society and commenced the publication of the Journal of the Jaffna Clinical Society, which later became the Journal of the Jaffna Medical Association. He was fluent in all three languages Sinhala, Tamil and English, and was able to easily gain the confidence of all his patients. In 1955 he was transferred to the Victoria Memorial Eye Hospital, Colombo, the Mecca of ophthalmology in Sri Lanka. He retired prematurely from the state service when private medical practice for state medical officers was abolished in 1964.

Much of above factual information is from the excellent biography of Dr. Sivasubramaniam compiled by Dr. S. Anandarajan FRCS, his devoted pupil, which is well worth reading. We will miss Dr. Sivasubramaniam's mature advice and guidance.

Shelton Wijetilaka