

Dr D A Gunawardane

Sri Lanka Journal of Dermatology, 2003, 7, 41-42

Dr D A Gunawardane, one of the greatest Clinicians and Dermatologists Sri Lanka produced, passed away, after a brief illness, at the age of 69 yrs. Sri Lanka first lost him in 1981 when he came over to the UK to be a Consultant Dermatologist to Aintree Hospital Trust, and Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen Hospital Trust, and then we lost him forever on April 6th 2001.

Douglas Abeysinghe Gunawardane, who was widely known as "Dago", was born in Mihiripenne, Galle, on May 3rd 1933. After his primary education he joined Royal College, Colombo and then gained entrance to the Medical Faculty of University of Colombo from where he graduated, in 1959, with Distinctions in Medicine and Surgery. Within a period of 3 years after graduation, not surprisingly, he obtained his M.D. degree. In 1964 Dago won a Commonwealth Scholarship to the UK where he had his training in Dermatology and also obtained his MRCP.

Many a budding and young dermatologists of today would assume that the status of dermatology has always been what it is now! Sadly, this was not the case when Dago returned from the UK in 1966. He was then appointed the Consultant Dermatologist in Kandy, where the Faculty of Medicine was already well established but without the services of a Dermatologist.

He, then, had only a few beds scattered on medical, surgical and paediatric wards, and often along the corridors! With his innate vigour and enthusiasm, which was well known, he soon established one of the best Dermatology Teaching Units in Sri Lanka and was soon boasting of 3 Senior House Officers to the Department.

I had the great fortune and privilege of knowing him very well from August 1972, when I became one of his Senior Housemen, subsequently when he was Consultant Dermatologist, Colombo, then in the UK, and finally during his brief terminal illness. He telephoned me one morning and quite lightly, in a matter of fact way, told me that he has only a few more weeks to live! I went to see him and was not too surprised to see him reclining comfortably on an easy chair with a blood transfusion through one arm and chemotherapy through the other. He assessed the situation critically in his, only too well known, analytical mind and taking into consideration the pros and cons, preferred to be surrounded by the family rather than be admitted

to hospital! This was typical of Dago. In fact, when I had to leave him that day, I quipped that he would laugh at all of us when the time comes to leave us finally, and would sing his way from us the mortals, Frank Sinatra's "I had it my way". Having worked with and associated some of the "dermatology greats" of the East and West, I would unhesitatingly and proudly regard him as a true and a great in dermatology and clinical medicine. He had the unique and rare fusion of thoughtful, critical, analytical mind together with brilliant clinical acumen and scientific methodology and thinking. This ironically is not an asset which could be included on to a curriculum vitae! During my 3 yrs as a Senior Houseman and Registrar to him in Kandy I recall many an instance when he was consulted by his consultant colleagues in other specialities. I vividly remember how we, his housemen, together with his colleagues would look up to him with admiration and not infrequently appeared stunned by the awesome ease with which he unravelled "difficult to diagnose" problems.

Amongst his numerous publications, the computer assisted analysis of psoriasis and the study of Sweet's syndrome published in the *British Journal of Dermatology* earned acclaim in the dermatology world with an astoundingly high degree of citation in dermatology literature. The paper on psoriasis highlighted, for the 1st time, the bimodal distribution pattern of the age of onset in psoriasis. He was disturbed by frequent duplication of patient records, in the pre-computer era, which essentially invalidated most of the studies presented at the time based on patient records. In order to overcome this he introduced the brilliant concept of phonetic coding of patient names and towns of residence. His outstanding sharpness and creativeness stemmed from his ability to separate the trivial from the substantive, the epiphenomena from the relevant and aim directly at the root of the matter.

His achievements were not confined to clinical medicine and dermatology. Dago was an all-round athlete who excelled in boxing, rugby and swimming. Boxing for Royal College, Colombo he was a public schools Stubbs Shield winner and won school colours and later university colours over a number of years. As an undergraduate he won university colours for athletics and swimming. He was one of the most feared and respected wing forwards in school rugby and won rugby colours at Royal College. Dago captained the

University Team in rugby and was awarded University Colours for five consecutive years. He represented Havelocks Sports Club and also became a committee member of the Sri Lanka Rugby Football Union and served as President of Kandy Sports Club.

He was widely read and also a keen historian. You would often find him to hold the centre stage in a conversation. He married Joyce whom he met in medical school. Two of the five children followed in the parents footsteps to do medicine. He was the eldest in the family and was very fond of the parents, sisters and brothers who in turn not only adored him but also looked up to him as their mentor. He was very happy and proud when he was able to charter

a helicopter to take his aged father by air on a pilgrimage to Mahiyangana.

We who were fortunate enough to have had him as our "guru" would always think back warmly with admiration and with gratitude of this truly great clinician, teacher and dermatologist.

Gamini Katugampola
Department of Dermatology,
Princess of Wales Hospital,
Bridgend,
Mid Glamorgan CF31 1QT,
U.K.