

# The good doctor

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Thank you, my dear friend Prof Senaka Rajapakse, for the kind words of introduction. I can only marvel at, what you as President, and your committee achieved, despite all obstacles placed in your way by the pandemic, lockdowns and economic downturn. We will think of 2021 in years to come and be inspired by your innovative and dynamic leadership of the Ceylon College of Physicians (CCP). I salute you and your council, wish you the very best and seek your wise counsel in the affairs of the CCP in 2022. Thank you.

It is with utmost humility that I stand before this august assembly, as the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the Ceylon College of Physicians. The CCP was established in 1967 when 12 eminent physicians met together at the then General Hospital Colombo. As we enter its 55<sup>th</sup> year, the CCP remains the premier academic professional organization for physicians in the country. Today we have, in our midst, general internal medicine specialists as well as physicians from all finer specialties. We also have other specialists such as psychiatrists, pathologists and paediatricians with representation in the council. We also have associate members who have passed the entry examination in MD medicine and are currently trainees at Registrar and Senior Registrar levels. Deriving strength from both, academic and professional eminence of its fellows and members, the CCP is uniquely placed to guide patient care and act, as the thought leader in defining the future direction of healthcare in Sri Lanka.

My journey in CCP started in 2005, when I was awarded the Wijerama Prize at the Young Physician's forum. I came back formally to the CCP's fold in 2013 when my mentor in the CCP, Prof Udaya Ranawaka invited me to join the council. That year there were

regional meetings in all nine provinces and I was entrusted with the task of creating academic programmes for all of these meetings. In 2015, my dearest teacher Dr Lalith Wijeyeratne invited me to be the secretary of CCP. That year taught me all about the traditions, etiquette and responsibilities of the CCP. In 2016, Dr Nihal Gunatilleke invited me to chair the Scientific Committee for the Annual Academic Sessions. During the Golden Jubilee Celebrations in 2017, I felt totally out of depth and had to claw at the very bottom of my 'humour-resources' when Prof S D Jayaratne invited me to be the master of ceremonies at the grand banquet. I survived, receiving only lighthearted censures, from not only the President of CCP, but President of RCP too. Subsequently, quite reluctantly, I had to take leave of the CCP when I was invited to be President of my beloved Galle Medical Association in 2019. That year served as my primer to be what I am today. In 2020, when past presidents Dr Ananda Wijewickrema and Prof Senaka Rajapakse invited me to send the statement of expression of interest to be President CCP, it was both a pleasant surprise and a cause for trepidation. Inspiring words of some trusted CCP friends reassured me that the time had indeed come and I was ready. I am grateful to all the past presidents of the CCP for appreciating my vision for 2022 and my years of dedication to the CCP, and nominating me as president elect in 2021. Today the greatest honour a physician can strive to achieve in Sri Lanka has been bestowed upon me. I accept this honour, with all humility.

The CCP has been led by the some of the greatest physician sons and daughters of this country. Thirteen of them are no longer with us. I honour their memory. Two of the 12 eminent physicians from 1967

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Dr Lakshman Ranasinghe and Prof Channa Wijesinghe still stand with the CCP. I pay tribute to the past Presidents who have elevated the CCP to its lofty standards. Many of them are here to share our joy today. I read the name list of past presidents of the CCP. It's a star studded list and equates to the Milky Way of physicians. It was difficult for me, not to have an existential crisis, looking at that list. But, as I stand before you, along with my council, and look to the future I am reminded of the quote, mistakenly assigned to Sir Issac Newton, but perhaps originating from Bernard of Chartres, centuries back, that we are indeed privileged to see further, as dwarfs perched on the shoulders of all the giants from past 54 years of the CCP.

Turning to the present, I believe we are all, cautiously optimistic about the year ahead. Though virus variants appear on a frequent basis ever expanding our knowledge on the Greek alphabet, with wide vaccination coverage, we may be able to resume greater personal interaction whilst retaining the wonders we claimed through online gathering. Whilst retaining our new gains, we set out to recapture past glories of the CCP. This brings me ladies and gentlemen, to the unveiling of the CCP's vision for 2022.

My personal mission in medicine has been simple. I wanted to become a good doctor. None of the lectures I attended, none of the books I read, could give me a clear, precise answer on how to get there. Obviously there are many good doctors around, but how to get there I believe one had to discover one's own truth. I have spent hours observing the good doctors, trying to learn. The doctors whom the patients would say, just seeing the doctor made them feel well. Is that possible? What is the quality that the good doctor has which can make these miracles happen? Hence I have been on a lifelong quest to identify which attributes go to make good doctor. And I share those thoughts with you.

The first attribute is, Technical prowess – the possession of up-to-date knowledge about illnesses and treatment, bedside medical examination skills, ability to perform relevant diagnostic and therapeutic procedures.

The second attribute is, Analytical thinking – the ability to understand and solve complex problems, that is to analyze the problems in order to arrive at a comprehensive differential diagnosis, determine most suitable tests and instituting patient centered care.

The third attribute is Communication skills – the ability to understand the told and untold stories of

patients. Doctors need to communicate with patients, families, colleagues and other staff in the medical setting. Our successes and failures depend on how well we communicate. An often made mistake in communication is, to limit it to, imparting information. Communication includes how we look at patients, how we smile and put them at ease, how we listen to their stories and not merely take histories, being empathetic, being able to understand how patients think and feel, being a friend to them whom they can approach to discuss their innermost worries, and make them feel that the doctor has their best interests at heart.

As John Stone, contemporary poet and cardiologist pens in his celebrated poem *Gaudeamus Igitur*, "For you may need to strain to hear the voice of the patient in the thin reed of his crying, for you will learn to see most acutely out of the corner of your eye, to hear best with your inner ear". This is the communication and comfort the patients seek from doctors.

The challenge before the CCP in 2022 is, how to align itself with these requirements to make "a good doctor"?

For the first attribute, technical prowess we will continue to strengthen the current academic activities. We have divided each of the 12 months to sub specialties and will conduct academic programmes on a specialty theme and the month of January was on cardiology. We have monthly college lectures and specialty updates where 3-4 speakers from the specialty participate in a symposium. There will be courses focused on postgraduate examinations, both at entrance level and MD medicine examination. The MRCP theory as well as PACES examination will be conducted hopefully this year after the two breaks for COVID. The pinnacle will be the Annual Academic Sessions which will take place from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> September this year, with the participation of local and overseas experts.

For the second attribute, analytical thinking, we have a problem based learning agenda. The mission is to learn from each other and share knowledge. Fools they say, learn from their mistakes and wise men learn from those of others. We will learn from peers. We will learn about successes and mistakes. Who are these peers? There will be peer learning from international experts in the "Cutting Edge" series, from the senior colleagues of who have seen it all, in our "Pearls of Wisdom" programme, from colleagues who work away from the centre in limited resource settings under the "Peripheries to the Fore". The monthly CCP quiz will be an online challenge to the membership and will

further develop our ability to analyse complex problems. The International Faculty Lecture in January was on “When to intervene in NSTEMI” which signifies the problem based learning we are aiming for.

For the third attribute, communications skills, we envisage greater engagement with humanities. Humanities help doctors in many ways. It gives them happiness and reduces exhaustion and burnout. They understand patient narratives better. Development of the skill to observe similar circumstances from different perspectives or lateral thinking, helps build an all-round story. We will promote greater engagement with humanities through a series of “Beyond Medicine” programmes, the first of which, on “Mythology in Medicine”, will happen in February. In addition, we will have a creative forum for members and families to engage with the fine arts. The CCP weekly update will have a column written by the president, discussing these ideas. The column last week highlighted the Theranos scandal and the sentencing of Elizabeth Holmes, bringing to the fore, the unhealthy nexus between medicine and business.

These were indeed the three attributes I had identified as making up the core of a good doctor. But over the past two years, as we grappled with the greatest of challenges doctors of our times have faced, with the COVID pandemic, I came to recognize the existence of a fourth attribute or a fourth dimension. That is resilience.

Resilience means the capacity to see through difficult times and recover quickly. The physicians who handled the pandemic better had greater resilience. As Epictetus, the slave turned philosopher wrote in ‘Enchiridion’, the most important thing is our ability to understand that external events are not under our control but we control how we respond to them. We could always look to survive a crisis, battled and bruised. But resilience means not just survival, but coming out of the tragedy with a greater set of skills, a greater ability to face up to similar situations in the future. In effect to become better than we were, before the pandemic. As Marcus Aurelius, the great Roman emperor and philosopher wrote, in ‘Meditations’, impediment to action advances action, what stands in the way, becomes the way.

How can the CCP take on this challenge – to align itself with building greater resilience among doctors?

Whilst contributing to personal development of individual physicians, we wish to reach out to a wider segment of both medical and non-medical professional

partners. Specialization, sub-specialization and finer specialization is wonderful for development of science but runs the risk of confining us to our enclaves, isolation and may be even promotion of personal interests. We could easily lose cohesiveness. What is bad for the hive is bad for the bee. Though we collaborate closely with our sister colleges, we can improve our cohesion with non-physician colleges. Hence we held our “Collegia Unitum Scientia” programme in January inviting the newly elected President of the College of Surgeons, Dr Satish Goonesinghe who is here with us today, to do a guest lecture on “Urology Sans Scalpel” for physicians. From next month we wish to reach out to our non-medical professional associations too, starting with the BASL, the president of which, Mr Saliya Pieris is an honoured guest today. When all medical professionals and other professional organizations share resources and move cohesively towards the common good of the society, we will all have greater resilience and become better, not despite the pandemic or any other adversity, but because of it.

This brings us to the theme for the year.

There was a brief introduction to the theme when the procession walked in to the music of Beethoven’s Ode to Joy from the 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony and the lighting of the lamp to the violin rendition of Jayamangala Gaatha. The usual practice is for a leader to think of a theme for the year and set programmes to meet it. We are doing it differently this year adopting a bottom up approach. We first identified what our core value was. A good doctor. Then we identified what goes into making a good doctor, technical prowess, analytical thinking, communication skills and resilience. We then aligned the CCP action plan to strengthen the attributes. Finally looking at all activities we have planned we set about summarizing it to a few words to be showcased as the theme. Hence ladies and gentlemen, the theme for CCP 2022 is “Crossing divides and bridging gaps”. I invite you all to walk the journey with us, supporting the council in all our activities, participating as both resource persons and the attentive audience. In one year’s time, on an occasion like this, I hope we will be able to look back and rejoice.

As I reach the final part of the Presidential address, I beg your indulgence for a moment, for me to thank some very special people who helped me in the journey to be here. My school teachers at DS Senanayake College, Colombo who taught me going that extra mile. Some of them are here today. My teachers at Colombo Medical Faculty who made me a doctor. One incident stands out which I would like to relate this evening to show how much teachers can

inspire students. As a second-year student, seated in the magnificent Physiology lecture theatre, Prof Colvin Gunaratne asked me an explanation for a problem on osmolality. Though I had very little idea about the nuances of osmolality, I gave him what I thought was a reasonable explanation for the question. He walked upright me, asked my name, walked back to the blackboard, wrote my name and said "Arosha is going to be a top physician in this country one day". I was very pleased knowing that he said something good was going to happen, but my problem was I hadn't the foggiest idea who a physician was!! During a long vacation at Medical College I had the privilege of working as a journalist for the Sunday Times. Under the tutelage of Mr Sinha Ratnatunga and Mr Iqbal Athas I honed my creative writing skills and I am grateful to them.

Upon graduation, my internship in medicine was with Prof Devaka Fernando, a mentor to me to this day and Prof Kamani Wanigauriya and Prof S D Jayaratne who have honored me by serving on the council this year. I was surgery intern to late great Prof Dayasiri Fernando and Prof Mohan De Silva who contributed so much to my development as a humane doctor but probably never forgave me for not becoming a surgeon. Prof P L Ariyananda and my teachers during my registrar and senior registrar days made me the physician and the university academic I am. My overseas trainers Prof Devaka Fernando and

Professor George Thomson for my development to work at an international setting. Professor Pali Hungin, my dear friend and my great mentor, for being with me through the good and difficult periods of my life. I am most grateful to all of them.

Finally my parents, who are no more, who taught me values and provided me a sound education. They were English lecturers and gifted me with the love of literature, writing and music. I am grateful to my wife Harshini's parents who are now my parents. My adorable children Dili and Desh who provide love and encouragement at all times and my wife Harshini, who has been everything to me. Her creativity has helped me do many beautiful things. She is the sounding board with whom I discuss every idea and she help me to see the good and bad sides. Without her by my side I would be much less. I am grateful to all of you.

As we speak of resilience, I leave you with, the words of, perhaps the greatest song ever sung. The Song of Buchenwald. Buchenwald was in a notorious Nazi concentration camp where this song was written, set to music and sung by the starved, ill, shivering with cold, inmates facing imminent death, to keep themselves away from despair. They implore us, not to lament or complain but to have courage and hope and say "Yes to Life"

Let's enjoy the year ahead.