

Obituary

Prof. Dr. P. Sugathan (1936-2024)

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Figure 1: Prof. Dr. P. Sugathan (1936-2024)

It was with profound sorrow that dermatologists across India heard that Prof. Dr. P. Sugathan [Figure 1], the legendary teacher of dermatology, passed away on July 31st, 2024.

Prof. Dr. Paramoo Sugathan was born on the 28th of June 1936 in a village called Cherunniyoor, near Varkala in Thiruvananthapuram district, in the erstwhile Travancore state. He took MBBS from Government Medical College, Thiruvananthapuram, and MD from All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. He had served as a faculty in the Departments of Dermatology and Venereology of the Government Medical Colleges in Thiruvananthapuram, Kottayam, and Kozhikode. He retired from Kozhikode in 1991 after serving several years there as a Professor and Head of Department. Later, he continued his services for nearly three decades in a private hospital in Kozhikode. Throughout his illustrious career, he was regarded as a teacher par excellence by his students. He was also a much sought-after physician for patients from far and wide across the state and even beyond it.

Prof. Sugathan was a great clinician. How he elicited history astounded not only his students but also the patients and their caregivers. This was possible because he had deep and very accurate knowledge of the lifestyle of the people, their jobs, and their habits. He knew how a carpenter, mason, or a construction worker used to work, their actions, and the exposures they were likely

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to have in their occupation. Many a time, he used to imitate their actions in detail, to the surprise of the patients. He had a special knack for connecting to others, leaving lasting impressions on them. This helped him to build trust and strike a rapport with them, making the history-taking more productive and treatment more effective.

“Galenicals” were one of his several passions in dermatology. He was always fascinated by the value of traditional compounded medications in the management of skin diseases in terms of cost, efficacy, and the potential to make them tailor-made to the patients. He used them, taught about them, and spoke about them in meeting after meeting.

He was an inspiring teacher. A disciplinarian, punctual to the core, he was a role model in professionalism. He encouraged and motivated his students to work hard and earnestly to achieve success. He was a non-quitter, and he transferred this quality to his students. Once an idea seized him, he pursued it to the maximum possible extent, often yielding stunning results. He displayed an unshakable resolve to find answers to vexing medical problems. He demanded the same from his postgraduate students, who were usually seen moving around various other departments such as biochemistry, pathology, etc. trying to find answers to unanswered questions in the academic sessions in the department.

He was an innovator, too. In the days when technology was not very advanced and devices rare, he practiced and taught his own methods for comedone extraction, “enucleation” of molluscum contagiosum, and corn excision, to name a few. He understood the value of photography and record-keeping. He was an expert in photography in those days when cameras and photography films were quite expensive and each photograph had to be taken with great care.

Prof. Sugathan was a great mentor. He used to extend a helping hand to his juniors whenever they felt any stumbling blocks in their career. He used to track the progress of his juniors, and when he felt they were rather “stagnating” (not fully doing justice to their potential), he did not mind having a quiet word with them. He always motivated his students to contribute something back to society, which helped them grow.

As a researcher, his greatest quality was that he was very grounded. He felt disturbed when he could not offer satisfactory solutions to common problems. Whether it was Piedra, Mudi-chood, dermatitis cruris pustulosa et

atrophicans, or blue neck syndrome, he was seized upon by common problems of our population which people did not have satisfactory answers in contemporary science because they were not explored sufficiently. He made it a point to make these topics for his research subjects. He succeeded in some completely and in others partially, but, in any case, he had advanced medical science to at least some extent in the process.

As much as he was an uncompromising teacher in the department, he was a very kind and lovable person outside it. I remember my first journey to attend the National Conference of Dermatologists. It was in Jaipur in the early months of 1990. He took a contingent of faculty members and post-graduates from the department with him. Although he could have traveled by flight, he chose to travel by train with us, as we students could afford only that much. He charted the travel plans, which included a brief sightseeing of Agra and Delhi, in addition to Jaipur, and made all necessary arrangements. We found him as a different person during this trip, very jovial and friendly, a surprising departure from his usual demeanour in the department.

He is survived by his loving wife, Smt Savithri, and their daughter, Smt Anitha, who is an English teacher. His son-in-law, Mr Mohanan, is a busy chartered accountant in Thrissur. Prof. Sugathan and Smt Savithri have two brilliant grandchildren – Ms. Sreedevi and Mr. Gokul.

As a student of his, I feel proud and happy that I could hand over the lifetime achievement of the Kerala branch of the Indian Association of Dermatologists, Venereologists and Leprologists (IADVL), when I was its State President in 2020. As a pleasant coincidence, I was on the stage as national Vice President when he was awarded the same at the national level too in Hyderabad in 2024, a few months before he left us permanently. It was only befitting of the association to honor thus, one of its founding leaders and strong pillar of support, and an illustrious member for several years.

Prof. Dr. Sugathan is no longer with us, but his rich legacy lives on and will continue to inspire future generations of dermatologists.

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