



Dr Visalachy Purushothaman
(29th March 1947 – 23rd July 2019)

A tribute to Dr Visalachy Purushothaman

My first encounter with Dr Visalachy Purushothaman was in 1991 when I was a medical officer in the obstetric ward in General Hospital Kuala Lumpur. She was reviewing a patient and I was struck by her kindness, not just towards the patient but to the attending staff as well.

Our paths crossed again when I was posted to general medicine. I really admired her clinical astuteness, knowledge and determination. After a year, I decided I wanted to do haematology and approached her. She welcomed me and I started working with her. I found out that not only was she kind but she was very generous too. During clinics, she would reach deep into her purse to extend money to patients who come from afar to see her.

Dr Puru, as she is fondly referred to, graduated from University of Madras in 1972. She did her housemanship in Hospital JIPMER Pondicherry and returned in 1973. She worked as a medical officer in Ipoh General Hospital until 1977 and then at the National Leprosy Control Centre, Sungai Buloh for 3 years.

She was working in the Institute of Medical Research before she left for the UK in 1982 to pursue her training in haematology at the Royal London Hospital. She became a Member of the Royal College of Physicians (MRCP) in 1983 and in 1987 attained her Membership from the Royal College of Pathologists (MRCPATH), which was no small feat; juggling a career with two children.

When she returned, she joined the medical department in General Hospital Kuala Lumpur as a physician and then as a haematologist. I remember during those times, patients with leukaemia were just given supportive care and placed at the end of the medical ward, eventually succumbing to their illness. Dr Puru adapted protocols from Germany and started treating these patients with chemotherapy. More patients were surviving.

She went on to set up a bone marrow transplant unit and in 1999 performed the first successful bone marrow transplant on a young adult patient with Chronic Myeloid Leukaemia. With more intensive treatment, the need for blood products grew and so did the transfusion service, hand in hand with the growth of clinical haematology.

Tirelessly, she went on to develop the haematology services in the other states including Sabah and Sarawak; waking up at 4 in the morning and taking the first flight out once every month, having

cooked a meal for her loving husband. Her passion for haematology and her love for her patients gave her all the energy to push forward.

Dr Puru would always stress the importance of doing both laboratory and clinical haematology, as the two cannot be separated. For this reason, she came over to my home and coaxed my husband to allow me to go to the UK to do my training in haematology and to sit for the MRCPPath exams. With a heavy heart I went, leaving my four children with my supportive husband and family. Looking back, I have no regrets at all. She was a driving force to what I am today.

Her greatest wish was for the services of transfusion, laboratory and clinical haematology to be under one department of haematology to ensure progress in this important field. Unfortunately, not everyone shared her vision. Eventually, she managed to convince the Ministry of Health and, with the support of the then deputy Director General of Health, Dato' Dr Ahmad Tajuddin Jaafar, to whom she has always been grateful, was able to set up a centre for haematology with a reference laboratory in Ampang hospital, which remains, until present, the national haematology referral centre.

Dr Puru received no national titles nor deserved promotions but these were not important to her. What was important was to establish a haematology service of international standard for the country and she has succeeded in doing this.

Dr Puru, you will always be remembered and cherished by all your patients, fellows you have trained and colleagues who have crossed your path. To the haematology fraternity, you embodied the best in medicine, our Mother of Haematology.

Farewell Dr Puru. Your legacy lives on in us.

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