

ayurvedic physician and scholar, Sri Raghavan Thirumulpad in Kerala. He was in his 80s. ‘We discussed what I had understood, he would point out my mistakes and stress the need for greater clarity, brevity and elaboration. He was generous enough to share related ideas and his own experiences. For two and half years I used to visit him once in two months.’ This resulted in the publication of *The Legacy of Caraka*.

Later, as National Research Professor, he studied the work of Sushruta and Vagbhata and completed the series of Legacy volumes on the pillars of Ayurveda.

Dr Valiathan explained in an interview why he turned to Ayurveda, ‘I think that my upbringing in an Ayurveda-friendly environment has a lot to do with it. Our family used to consult a reputed Ayurvedic physician nearby for any illness except for those that warranted surgical intervention. However, through my active professional career in modern medicine, Ayurveda had disappeared from my sight only to resurface in the 1990s, a time when the feeling that nothing in my cardiac surgical practice, or indeed in the modern medicine, had been contributed to by an Indian started to dominate my thoughts. The fact that there had been no global contribution by an Indian in areas like causation of a disease, a drug, a surgical technique, a technology, a prophylactic regime in medicine disturbed my mind. I could not accept that originality in science was exclusive to white people. As I started my probe into the history of medicine in our country I was led to the life and times of scholarly sages—Charaka, Susruta, and Vagbhata.’

During the remaining years of his life he kept emphasizing that ayurveda is not only the mother of medicine but also of all life sciences in India. He strove for a common ground where physicists, chemists, immunologists and molecular biologists can interact with ayurvedic physicians. These are the interdisciplinary areas where advances would take place. He conducted seminars, workshops and delivered talks on this and related subjects.

He was especially fond of referring to ethics as it was taught by the three ayurvedic pioneers he had written about. In *The Legacy of Caraka*, he imagined the sage addressing our generation of physicians: ‘You would do well to remember that you are on new ground where knowledge is preferred to wisdom, where profit is confused with happiness and success is mistaken for triumph. You should look at where you are and where you are headed. Do not expect miracles of me. I have none to offer. I have left you a heritage which, though all-embracing, exists within a world of unknown reserves of knowledge, experience and faith. It behoves you to explore the trackless land, even as your forefathers did, and enhance your power to heal. But far from glorifying knowledge, you should celebrate good conduct, free from extremes and errors of judgement. Ayurveda owes its call not to selfish goals or worldly pleasure, but to compassion for fellow beings. In seeking to know my legacy, you have but seen the leaves of a universal tree, too vast for your eyes. May your sight grow and your quest never end.’

Accolades, awards

He was a respected member of several national academic organizations such as the Indian National Science Academy, Indian Academy of Sciences, Indian National Academy of Engineering, The World Academy of Sciences, American College of Cardiology, Royal College of Physicians of London, International Union of Societies of Biomaterials and Engineering and presided over some of them. He received numerous

accolades and awards including the Padma Vibhushan (2005), Dr B.C. Roy National Award, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award, J.C. Bose Medal, and Dr Samuel P. Asper Award for International Medical Education from Johns Hopkins University. France honoured him by appointing him Chevalier of the Order of Palmes Académiques. He was Hunterian Professor of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

I strongly recommend his autobiographical essay published in 2008. It contains a wealth of fascinating information on himself, his work and his values.

SUGGESTED READING

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THE ROYAL LEGACY OF A SIMPLE MAN: THE STORY OF PROFESSOR MSV

Professor Marthanda Varma Sankaran Valiathan (MSV), a distinguished recipient of the Padma Vibhushan award, came from the esteemed Mavelikkara Dharma Raja Kaval Royal family, which held a prominent position within the Travancore Royal Kingdom. Born to Marthanda Varma and Janaki Varma, MSV’s birthplace was Mavelikkara, a calm and quiet interior location in the Alappuzha district of Kerala. This region has produced several notable individuals, including the esteemed administrator, former governor, the late P.C. Alexander, the renowned musician Mridanga Vidwan Mavelikkara Krishnankutty and many other celebrities. MSV received his primary education in this village before going on to graduate as part of the first batch of Trivandrum Medical College. Subsequently, he pursued advanced training in clinical medicine and research in the UK and the USA.

Early career challenges and the establishment of Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute

On his return to India, securing a suitable job proved to be a challenge. Despite his qualifications, he was unable to obtain a desirable position in any of the prestigious institutions of that time. During this period, he worked at various hospitals, including the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh, Safdarjung Hospital, Delhi, and Railway Hospital, Madras (new Chennai), where research activities were limited.

A turning point in his life occurred when C. Achutha Menon, the then Chief Minister of Kerala and leader of the communist party, invited him to return to Kerala and establish a public sector hospital dedicated to cardiac and neurological care. This invitation came with the assurance of complete autonomy in overseeing the development and operations of the proposed hospital.

Late Sree Chitra Tirunal Maharaja, with whom he shared a close relationship, graciously offered land and building as a donation for this noble endeavour. His Highness's sole request was that underprivileged individuals should receive medical care free of charge. It is worth noting that the same royal family had previously contributed the SAT Hospital for Women and Children in the Medical College Campus.

With this generous support, the Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute of Medical Science and Technology (SCTIMST) was established. The people of Kerala were fortunate to have MSV relocate to Trivandrum and subsequently establish what became a centre whose reputation spanned the globe.

It is an interesting coincidence that both MSV sir and the Maharaja were born under the 'Chithira Nakshatram' (Malayalam star), and the institution of the same name was their joint creation. It was undoubtedly the Almighty's choice for the donation to be made by Chitra Thirunal Maharaja and for MSV to be the Founding Director.

His passion for Biomedical Technology and his foresight of its importance in clinical practice led to the establishment of the Biomedical wing in Sethu Lakshmi Bayi's Satelmond Palace at Poojapura, 11 km from SCTIMST. Those who have had the privilege of visiting that campus will never forget the beautiful garden surrounding the palace, as well as the state-of-the-art animal house and experimental laboratory.

My days with Dr M.S. Valiathan

I had the privilege of working under the esteemed guidance of Dr M.S. Valiathan from 1986 to 1994. Following the completion of my MCh at AIIMS, the late Professor N. Gopinath wrote a letter to Dr Valiathan, requesting a position for me in my hometown of Trivandrum. I was subsequently appointed as a lecturer in cardiac surgery and was promoted to the position of additional professor within a span of 8 years. During this period, Dr Valiathan encouraged me to enhance my surgical skills in coronary surgery by pursuing further training in Australia.

Dr Valiathan demonstrated remarkable foresight and vision. In the early 1990s, he entrusted me with the responsibility of establishing the coronary surgery programme in collaboration with the late Professor M. Mohan Singh. My experience serves as a testament to his unwavering dedication in inspiring young surgeons to actively engage in research projects. Under his guidance, I conducted clinical trials involving the Chitra Cardiomy reservoir and the award-winning trans-myocardial revascularization (TMR) technique utilizing Nd-YAG laser in canine hearts.

MSV had a spacious office in the new building with panoramic views of the typical Kerala greenery and nature. The sight of flights landing and taking off from the Trivandrum airport with the Arabian Sea in the background remains an unforgettable memory. Numerous research ideas were conceived in this sacred temple. The guidelines were simple—convince him of the objective, methodology and potential clinical benefits, you would be granted full autonomy, and he would make every effort to secure the necessary research funding.

During those cherished moments conversing with MSV sir, he would reflect on the arduous journey he undertook in establishing SCTIMST. Various individuals, primarily from the medical college campus, were eager to replace him. Frustration ensued as the valve trial malfunctioned for the third time, causing him embarrassment. Nevertheless, both he and the valve persevered through the challenges. Subsequently, he earned the respect and admiration of all his detractors and skeptics. He emerged as an exemplary figure in administration, clinical cardiac surgery, research and mentorship for young scientists.

After his tenure at SCTIMST, I had the occasional coincidental encounters with him at conferences and airports. Even as an octogenarian, he continued to travel extensively, delivering speeches and addresses. His speeches were truly remarkable events. His commanding voice, profound linguistic abilities, insightful understanding, captivating narratives, and interconnected stories held the audience's unwavering attention. Recently, he was approached by an individual seeking advice on becoming an accomplished speaker. His response was succinct and insightful: 'Consider the topic, make mental notes, necessary revisions, and proceed with confidence.'

In my most recent meeting, I had the privilege of hearing him deliver the Professor Gopinath Memorial Oration at AIIMS, New Delhi. In his 90s, he continued to demonstrate remarkable knowledge, alertness and enthusiasm for medical research projects undertaken by young scientists.

During the early stages of his clinical work and research, MSV mentored a substantial number of young individuals who later achieved considerable recognition both nationally and internationally. Among the distinguished individuals are Professor K.G. Balakrishnan, Professor C.G. Venkitachalam and Dr Subramaniam from the cardiology department.

Additionally, there were several fortunate individuals who had the opportunity to assist MSV in his clinical and research endeavours, including the late Dr Mohan Singh, Dr Mohan Das, Dr K.S. Neelakandan, Dr Sankar Kumar, Dr Shyam Krishnan, Dr Unni Krishnan and Dr Krishna Manohar.

Under the guidance of Mr R.V. Ramani in the biomedical wing, many internationally renowned scientists bloomed such as the late Dr Ved Narayan (an expert in toxicology), Dr Bhuvaneshwar, Dr Nagesh, Dr Vijayakumar and the late Dr Arthur Victor (a veterinary surgeon), among others.

Esteemed Dr C.C. Kartha and Dr Mrs Kartha, affectionately referred to as 'the pathologist family', dedicated a portion of their careers and lives to Chitra under the guidance of MSV sir. Their ground-breaking scientific research on endomyocardial fibrosis (EMF) has left an indelible mark on the field. While the prevalence of this disease has diminished over time, Dr Valiathan remained the pre-eminent authority in this specialized area.

Chitra hospital

He was dedicated to fulfilling his obligations to the royal family and the chief minister. He established a patient classification system with categories A, B, C and D. Category A patients received completely free treatment, while paying patients were classified as category D. Notably, Sree Chitra Hospital still operates without private rooms. All hospital personnel treat every patient with dignity and respect, irrespective of their financial or social status.

During the initial phase, financial challenges were considerable, as over 70% of the hospital beds were occupied by category A patients. Consequently, he frequently travelled to

Delhi to engage with officials from the Department of Science and Technology (DST) to emphasize the importance of research and clinical work. His efforts were instrumental in securing increased funding from the DST and in establishing SCTIMST as an institute of national importance through an Act of Parliament, with the support of Prime Minister Morarji Desai.

Research products

One of the initial products to emerge from the research division was the Chitra Blood Bag. This initiative was spearheaded by Mr Balagopal Chandrasekhar, a young and dynamic IAS officer, who made the bold decision to leave his government service to pursue his passion for establishing Penpol blood bag production. Subsequently, Terumo Japan recognized the potential of the innovation and acquired it, transforming it into the world's leading producer of cutting-edge blood bag systems. This remarkable achievement firmly established SCTIMST's reputation as a pioneering institution in the medical sector, renowned for its path-breaking technology and device creation.

Chitra heart valve

The Chitra heart valve stands as a testament to the unwavering dedication of his younger years. Despite the failure of the first three valve models, MSV remained steadfast in his support of the team, ultimately leading to the successful development of the fourth model. Notably, MSV selflessly chose to forego personal recognition by not naming the valve after himself, instead bestowing the honor upon the Maharaja who provided the necessary resources and opportunities.

Since its initial clinical implantation in 1990, over 200 000 Chitra prosthetic valves have been successfully implanted in patients, not only in India but also in various countries around the world. The valve's efficacy and reliability have made it a preferred choice among medical professionals.

One remarkable testimonial of the Chitra valve's success is the case of Mr K.D. Muraleedharan, who, at the age of 38, became the first recipient of the valve. Now, at 71 years of age, Mr Muraleedharan continues to live a healthy and happy life, solidifying the impact of the Chitra valve. Mr Muraleedharan, frequently invited to all special events at SCTIMST, often recounts his story 'at a time when nobody was willing to accept an experimental product, I chose to proceed placing full confidence in MSV sir'. The patient's unwavering trust in MSV and the SCTIMST team during a time of experimentation and uncertainty serves as a poignant reminder of the profound impact that visionary leadership and unwavering commitment can have on the lives of countless individuals.

Several years before the inception of the 'Make in India' initiative, Professor MSV successfully demonstrated its viability in the medical and scientific domains. Professor MSV showcased the potential for a public sector hospital to deliver exceptional patient care and conduct valuable research.

In July 2024, SCTIMST achieved a historic milestone by performing their first paediatric cardiac transplant. This accomplishment came shortly after the passing of this revered figure of the medical community. One can imagine him observing from his heavenly abode, his heart swelling with pride, much like any father witnessing the remarkable achievements of his child.

Post-retirement pursuits

Following his retirement from SCTIMST, Professor MSV continued to cultivate a deep curiosity about diverse fields. His interests spanned Ayurveda, the Sanskrit language and Classical music. The latter was particularly meaningful to him as it connected him to his late mother, Janaki Varma, a renowned veena player. Professor MSV was captivated by the role of science in the evolution of these disciplines.

In the years after retirement, Professor MSV shared common ground with the late Professor N. Gopinath. While Professor Gopinath excelled in researching the epidemiology of coronary artery disease in urban populations, Professor MSV turned his focus to Ayurveda, seeking to integrate this ancient practice with contemporary medicine. His scholarly work in Ayurveda, including extensive research and translation of major texts such as the Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Vagbhata into English, has left an indelible mark. His advocacy for Ayurveda as a foundational medical specialty emphasized that doctors should approach patient care with compassion and a commitment to holistic well-being, or Swaukiyam.

A lasting impact

Despite his numerous achievements, Professor MSV remained modest and declined to write an autobiography. Instead, his life story was captured in the biography *Mayoora Shikha*, penned by Mr V.D. Selvaraj, and published by Mathrubhumi Books. This work offers valuable insights into his life and contributions, hopefully it will be translated into English to reach a global audience.

Professor MSV's legacy is characterized by his unpretentious nature and his profound impact on the field of medicine. He will be remembered not for any royal lineage but for his empathy towards the less privileged and his pioneering contributions to biomedical technology and medical education. His passing marks the end of an era of advancement in medical research and science. His memory will endure through the generations and serve as a beacon of dedication and innovation.

Final reflections

Professor MSV was an exemplary individual—an outstanding teacher, an inspiring role model, a distinguished scholar, a visionary leader and a compassionate human being. Even in his later years, he maintained a sense of humour and acceptance. In a recent meeting he described himself as 'an old man going forward with the help of a walking stick'.

As he departs, let his soul find peace in heaven. The world has lost a brilliant intellect and a selfless advocate for the betterment of humanity. Professor MSV's contributions will continue to inspire and guide future generations.

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