

Obituary

Vasantha Muthuswamy

(12 July 1948–21 February 2023)

*Our life is full of interpunctions, or commas;
death is but the period or full point.*

—Thomas Jackson, Maran Atha,
A. Maxey, 1657



Born to Shri R. Seetharaman and Smt Tripurasundari on 12 July 1948 in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, Dr Vasantha Muthuswamy's journey came to a full point on 21 February 2023 leaving behind her son, Mahesh, daughter-in-law, Mugdha, two sisters, Vijayalakshmi and Vanitha, and one brother, Rajagopalan. After finishing school at St Raphael's Girls' High School, Madras with flying colours, she did her Pre-University at Stella

Maris College, Chennai. Thereafter, her education continued in Kolkata for a pre-professional and medicine course. She did her MBBS and Diploma in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at R.G. Kar Medical College, Kolkata. She was a topper throughout her studies. Soon after qualifying for MD with a Gold Medal from the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Madras Medical College, Chennai in 1979, she got selected as a scholar in the Science Talent Scheme initiated by the visionary Dr C. Gopalan, Director General, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). This involved training at various institutes of ICMR before getting a placement as an ICMR Scientist. This came in handy during her later years at the ICMR.

Her first posting was at the Toxaemia Research Unit, Vani Vilas Hospital, Bangalore (present day Bengaluru) in 1979 and then at the ICMR institute, currently named the National Institute of Reproductive Research and Child Health, Mumbai in 1980. She was transferred to ICMR headquarters in 1982 where she worked for some time in the Division of Reproductive Health and Nutrition, the Indo-foreign cell and the Division of Basic Medical Sciences (BMS) before she went to Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie on a contract appointment. Although on return, she was given charge of the Division of BMS as its Chief at a lower rank, she did not let that deter her from discharging her duties as the head, which besides science made her understand the administrative and financial aspects of research management as well. She faced challenges with determination and confidence.

In 2009, she rose to the rank of Senior Deputy Director General in the Division and made its several activities a strength to reckon with. Her approachable demeanour, leadership qualities and willingness to listen were assets that made her junior scientists and staff give her the support to carry out her tasks with efficiency. Later, she was given additional charge as Director-in-charge of the current National Institute of Immunohaematology (2003–2005) and seven months before retirement as Head of the Division of Reproductive Health and Nutrition in 2008.

Faced with the task of revising ICMR's 1980 Policy Statement on Ethics entrusted by Dr G.V. Satyavati, Director General, ICMR under the Chairmanship of Hon'ble Chief Justice of India, Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah, and the training she received on a WHO Fellowship in bioethics from the Kennedy Institute of Bioethics, Georgetown University, USA, her interest in the area grew, which made her a renowned national and international expert in bioethics.

Her journey started with the first revision of ICMR's Ethical Guidelines released in 2000, followed by other revisions and other guidelines pertaining to animal experiments, stem cell research, genetically modified food, research on children, Good Clinical Laboratory Practices and COVID-19. Other countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka and agencies such as the WHO, UNAIDS, Family Health International and HIV Prevention Trials Network benefited from her contribution. She had participated in workshops related to the



*In a video meeting of
the PREPARED project,
September 2022*

formulation of the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) Guidelines 2000 and Nuffield Council, UK. She was part of training for setting up ethics committees in Cambodia, Laos People's Democratic Republic and Maldives. She was the founder member secretary of the committee initiated by WHO Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR) in formulating operational guidelines for ethics committees in 2000, which led her to become a member of the Steering Committee of the Forum for Ethical Review Committees of the Asian and Western Pacific Region (FERCAP). She was Co-investigator for the National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded bioethics education activities. She was associated with the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* as a member of its Editorial Advisory Board and also an active proponent of ethics at the National Bioethics Conferences organized by the Journal.

She made it possible to get the long-awaited release of the book on *Indian childhood cirrhosis* based on a multicentre collaborative study and the first volume of *Biomedical ethics: Perspectives in the Indian context*, a much-needed effort. A number of years were spent under her leadership to get the ICMR's Ethical Guidelines enacted and finally, they were incorporated indirectly in the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019 making the Ethical Guidelines a mandatory requirement to adhere to in human research. As president of the Forum for Ethics Review Committees in India, the National Chapter of FERCAP, she partnered the efforts for the formulation of the 'Global Code for the Conduct of Research in Resource-poor Settings' under the European Union (EU) project 'TRUST'. In the later few months of her life, she was engaged with another EU project 'PREPARED', which has lost one of its leading advisors.

She was a good teacher, orator, sharp analyser and advisor not only in bioethics but also in other areas such as drug

development, genetics, genomics, genetically modified food, haematological diseases and traditional medicine. She could quickly grasp and understand new areas that were offered to her as additional responsibilities in the ICMR. Even after retirement, she was very active in executing her tasks. She was Chair and a member of many national and international committees, and ethics committees. She could talk endlessly in various workshops without tiring. Her energy was an inspiration to others. She never considered her ailments as a hindrance to pursuing a task entrusted to her because she always came out of those situations with confidence and grit. She never used her position to get special or out-of-turn treatment.

When travelling together for programmes, I had spent anxious moments during some of those times of suffering and had seen and known how her strength came from the thought that work was her 'lifeline'. Unfortunately, this daunting spirit ebbed away gradually in the last few months of illness and finally, she gave in plunging her family, friends and colleagues into a sense

of deep loss. Being the eldest child in the family, she herded her sisters and brother into her warm care, especially after her father passed away when she was young. When needed, she was always at their side including that of her mother (who passed away in her nineties). This support was also extended to her colleagues and friends and now, that light has gone. A fond mother and sister, a dear colleague, a loving human being, and a renowned leader has left us. May peace be with her in her heavenly abode!

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Many doctors in India practise medicine in difficult areas under trying circumstances and resist the attraction of better prospects in western countries and elsewhere. They die without their contributions to our country being acknowledged.

The National Medical Journal of India wishes to recognize the efforts of these doctors. We invite short accounts of the life and work of a recently deceased colleague by a friend, student or relative. The account in about 500 to 1000 words should describe his or her education and training and highlight the achievements as well as disappointments. A photograph should accompany the obituary.

—Editor