

Dr George Rasanayagam Handy

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A very distinguished Old Boy of St John's College, Jaffna

Remembered with great admiration, and genuine affection

By

A student and former Senior House Officer of his,

VICTOR ARIYARATNAM BENJAMIN

Dr George Rasanayagam Handy died in 1995, in Colombo. He was born in 1902, and was therefore 93 years when he died. We are told that his funeral was a very private one, and people came to know that he had passed away from this life, only long after his funeral, in accordance to his wishes. In death, his modesty, disguising a unique blend of arrogance prevailed. He wanted to be different from others. In life, he had toiled and laboured with an unparalleled sense of pride and dignity, never wanting respect or honour from anybody. He did not want others to come to his aid, or to him. On the contrary, he went to the aid of others, and he made himself available to all others, at all times. He knew that he was always reconciled with his God, who created him, sustained him, and blessed him more than anyone else he may have known. He always preferred to disappear as quietly, as he entered, and make his exit from this world be as unnoticed as happened everyday during his work as a Physician at General Hospital, Colombo.

His origins, and school days

I do not know of anyone living now, who remembers his early life. Those who knew that aspect of George Handy are all dead. This makes it very difficult to find out details about his childhood and youth. His nephew Percy Handy informs me that George Handy's parents were Revd and Mrs C.C. Handy, and that Revd C.C. Handy was the first Ceylonese to act as Principal of St John's College during the years 1890 to 1892. The name "Handy" has found a permanent and everlastingly visible place in St John's College, Jaffna. Handy House, and Handy Memorial Library were established in memory of Revd C.C. Handy, (Dr G R Handy's father). The Handy Memorial Hostel and Handy Hall were so named in recognition of the services to the College by Mr J C Handy, (Dr G R Handy's brother).

George Handy was an intelligent scholar, as a school boy at St John's College. One of his contemporaries at school, (our former JDCSI Bishop in Jaffna, the late Rt Revd Dr Sabapathy Kulandran) often spoke to me, in extremely complimentary terms about Dr George Handy's days in school, and subsequent career. To be admired by Bishop Kulandran was a unique recognition, when one realises that the only other person whose school career was also similarly admired by Bishop Kulandran, was Bishop Kulandran's own brother Sam Sabapathy. Kulandran almost conceded that these were the only two students at school, who were smarter than himself. In personal conversation with me, Bishop Kulandran never got tired of talking in glowing terms about George Handy and one other Tamil doctor, the late Dr S.L. Navaratnam, (who also was a teacher of mine). To Bishop Kulandran, all other doctors were mere ordinary mortals. Another great Tamil intellect who has spoken to me in shining terms about George Handy was the late Mr K Nesiah. (Nesiah too was my teacher). (Clearly, Sabapathy Kulandran,

Nesiah, and George Handy were born about the same time, and they had profound mutual respect for each other. All three of them were great men, and they all reached the age of 90, at least a few years before each one died).

In Ceylon Medical College.

As a medical student at the Ceylon Medical College, George Handy won numerous Gold Medals, Prizes, and Distinctions, at all examinations. It is stated that he came first in order of merit at all examinations, and qualified as a Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery in 1927. I am personally aware that he was extremely proud of his L.M.S., (Ceylon) qualification.

Later on, he was appointed a Lecturer/Demonstrator in Physiology at the Ceylon Medical College. This was the commencement of his role as a Teacher in the medical profession. Thereafter, he remained a teacher, all his life.

Career as a doctor.

He went to Britain for postgraduate studies and obtained in the London M.B.B.S degree, and the Diploma in Tropical Medicine & Hygiene. I am told that he won a Gold Medal in Physiology, and the Duncan Medal in Tropical Medicine, on the results of these examinations. The outbreak of World War Two compelled him to return to Ceylon, without completing all his intended studies.

In 1942 he was appointed as Judicial Medical Officer in Colombo. Soon, he became an authority in Forensic Medicine and Pathology. (He often told me about his having been a Pathologist, but I do not know whether he was referring to his period as the Premier Forensic Pathologist in Colombo, or whether he had also held the position of a Hospital Pathologist in Colombo, at sometime or other).

He proceeded again to Britain in 1947, and obtained the prestigious qualifications, a Doctorate in Medicine from the University of London, and the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians of London. There were only 8 others in the whole of Ceylon, at that time, with the qualification of M.R.C.P., (London). They were John Blaze, Cyril Fernando, D.J. Liyanage, V.E.P. Seneviratne, E.M. Wijerama, Prof P.B. Fernando, Prof Milroy Paul, (the surgeon) and Ramanathan, (who was Physician at Jaffna). Among these 8, three did not have the additional qualification of MD., although one of them earned the MD. (Lond) qualification in 1951, for outstanding research, and in order to become the principal examiner at the very first local MD. (Ceylon) examination which was held in Colombo in 1952. When George Handy returned to Ceylon with these qualifications, he was appointed as another Visiting Physician to General Hospital, Colombo.

He was the very first person from Ceylon to qualify thus, as a Physician, after the outbreak of war in 1939. Ceylon was yet a Crown Colony in the British Empire. At the time of his return to Ceylon with these qualifications, the priority in Ceylon (both for the British Government, and the Ceylon Government), was the successful transition to Independence for Ceylon, and the resulting changes. At that time, in General Hospital, Colombo, there were 7 Medical Units, each with a different Physician in charge. One of these Physicians was the Professor of Medicine at the University of Ceylon. The other six were designated Visiting Physicians. Each of these seven Physicians had separate wards for their male and female patients. At that time, the Ceylon Government could not understand how an 8th or 9th medical Unit could be inaugurated in General Hospital, Colombo. Their thinking was that there were only 7 days in a week. They had 7 Medical Units. Each unit covered all the emergency work, on one day, each week. The Government was unable to conceive of any situation that could result in the creation of another Medical Unit, and putting Dr George Handy in charge of such a unit. Dr Handy was soon followed by the arrival of another Ceylonese Physician, Dr Hilary Gunawardene. Dr Handy was assigned as assistant to the Senior Physician Dr John Blaze, while Dr Gunawardene became the assistant to Dr Gunaratnam Cooke, MD. As Medical Students, we felt that Blaze (with Handy, as his assistant) and Cooke (with Gunawardene as the assistant) both felt very

important, but also a bit uncomfortable. No clinician would have liked having an assistant who was in greater demand than the boss. So, when Physicians went on overseas leave, and their wards were looked after by Handy or Gunawardene, everybody was happy. In this unstable and unsatisfactory situation, we knew that both Handy, and Gunawardene, were absolutely loyal to the Physicians whose "assistants " they were.

During the 3 years I knew Dr Handy in the 'student-teacher' relationship, he never even once displayed any knowledge that he was aware of my family connections, or that I was from Jaffna, or that we both had been students of the same school, in spite of his having known my father, and his awareness that he and I were Old Boys of St John's College; both our names have appeared in the same issues of the St John's College Magazine, but on different pages, and for different reasons. To reciprocate the cultivated aloofness, I too, in my own way, never showed that I knew anything about his background, or Jaffna connections. This bit of "distance" kept between us was really necessary to be able to get "close" to him, and to get the best out of him, as a teacher. We had great mutual respect for each other, but never was there any place for familiarity.

My next contact with him started in July 1955, when I was appointed a Senior House Officer at Colombo General Hospital, and was assigned to work under Dr George R. Handy. He was as pleased as I was. No predecessor of mine seemed to have worked consistently, to Dr Handy's entire satisfaction. Working with Dr Handy was really very difficult. He had more patients than any of the other Physicians. There was a constant and unending influx of new patients admitted to Dr Handy's wards. There were far more patients than the number of beds. In Colombo's General Hospital, the number of beds in a ward had no relevance to the number of patients admitted. There were "floor patients" who had no beds, and who were given a mat and a pillow. (I believe that the same situation still prevails in most hospitals in Sri Lanka, even today). While many "floor patients" in hospitals were willing to gratefully accept this lack of a hospital bed, in Dr Handy's medical wards, the situation was very different. Most of the "floor patients" came from segments of society where lack of a bed was totally unacceptable, and who seemed to have an inexhaustible number of Very Important Persons interested in them, all trying to obtain a bed for them. Dr Handy never intervened in the issues of bed allocation to patients. There were Roman Catholic Nursing Nuns in charge of hospital wards during that era, and these ladies exercised a considerable authority with independence. When refusal by the Nursing Nuns, of a request for a bed had occurred, the VIP's would telephone the House Officers with the same requests. It was never possible to please all. We were willing to do our duty. We were not in a position to provide favours. With this reality, it was difficult working under a Physician who was far too popular in the country. Yet, we all survived.

The Paying Wards too were full of Dr Handy's patients. Dr Handy had more patients on certain days, than all other Physicians, combined. Among his patients in the Paying Wards, there would be Supreme Court Judges, Commissioners of Assize (a category almost equal to the Supreme Court Judges), Permanent Secretaries, Heads of Government Departments, members of the now defunct Ceylon Civil Service, politicians of every persuasion including Cabinet Ministers, Members of the Parliament, religious dignitaries, big businessmen, senior policemen, doctors, lawyers, and such persons of great social standing. While attending on such patients provided very useful influential contacts, they simultaneously created greater demands on our time. They would want everything explained. They would not have necessarily understood the brief, polite, puzzling, riddles in which Dr Handy would have answered their questions, often with a pleasant, but sarcastic smile, which communicated without words, that such questions should be directed to his assistants who had more time on their hands.. It would be easier to explain the symptoms, and answer the questions that such patients would ask, talking directly to such patients. It was far more difficult talking with the wives of such patients. Often, these VIP patients would want to relate some story which they remembered as very funny, or important. They would want more of our time listening to it, than in attending on their medical needs. It was just not possible to rudely get away without listening to most of what they had to say. We were dealing with persons of standing in the society. Fortunately, our tasks were made easy, because every patient was seen at least once each day by Dr George Handy; he did ward rounds every morning, and every afternoon. We did ward rounds every morning, every afternoon, and every night as well.

People never really knew the volume of work that Dr Handy undertook. In addition to Colombo General Hospital, he had to visit almost every Private Hospital in Colombo, every day. He had patients in all those Private Hospitals. In addition, he had a very large Consulting Practice in the Consulting Rooms at his residence, initially at Havelock Road, Colombo 5, and later at Guildford Crescent, Colombo 7. He was always immaculately dressed, in a spotlessly clean and fresh suit, and matching tie, at all times. Being smart was part of his professional image.

As a teacher.

George Handy enjoyed his teaching. He was always well prepared. He studied his subject, and taught with clarity and authority. Attendance was never compulsory for his lectures and at clinical teaching sessions, at the bedside of patients. Students would never miss his classes. He never carried even a scrap of paper to his lectures. He had a perfect memory, and knew what he taught. He was very precise in what he said. Some years later, when the University advertised for a Professor of Medicine, Dr George R. Handy was an applicant. It was widely known that the Faculty of Medicine was not looking for the most eligible person to become the Professor. Divisive politics had eaten its way into University, which at that time had begun to look for criteria other than academic merit, professional eminence, character, suitability, and such factors. Dr Handy was far above matters such as ethnicity, racial, linguistic, cultural, and religious issues. The University was unable to overlook Dr George Handy's application. The University did not want Handy. So, the University had to resort to re-advertising the same vacancy, stating that the earlier advertisement had been inaccurate, and altered conditions of service were introduced for that position as Professor. The new advertisement stated that no form of Private Practice would be allowed. They knew that George Handy would never forego his privilege of Private Practice, which made him available to everyone, and at times, outside the sole teaching hospital premises. It was the source of his great influence, importance, and power. The University succeeded in appointing its very first full-time Clinical Professor who did not enjoy the right of Private Practice. That Professor was not G R Handy.

Other honours.

Sometime before British Imperial Honours were abolished in Ceylon, Dr Handy was conferred the O.B.E. by the British Government. O.B.E stood for the Order of the British Empire. The Royal College of Physicians of London made Dr Handy a Fellow of their College. The American College of Cardiologists also made Dr Handy, one of their Fellows. There must have been many other similar Colleges which also honoured Handy.

After retirement from Government Employment.

Dr Handy retired from the Department of Health in 1962, on reaching the age of 60 years. It did not have any effect on the volume of patients he continued to have, outside the Government Institutions. In fact, he became more busy in the Private Sector, after his retirement from Public Service. He continued to be the most sought after Physician in Colombo.

The human side of Dr Handy.

In 1965, I met him one day, in a Private Hospital in Colombo, where I had a single patient. I had commenced work at Colombo South Hospital. He was very pleased that I held a position in Colombo. He thought that I was intending to remain in Colombo for the rest of my working life. He felt that he should share with me, some wisdom, which he had found useful. He called me aside, and gave me a bit of advice, which he thought was appropriate, and he wished me to follow it. He told me never to consider my working colleagues as my equals. He wanted me to always be conscious that others were no match for me to be concerned with. He said that I should always look down on my colleagues with sneer, and work at a level far better than all of them. I realised then, that he had at last accepted me as a colleague of his, and whom he was proud of. I also knew that he had been very honest and sincere in the advice he gave me that

day. He had practised that attitude all his working life, but without causing any offence to any one. He was aware that his colleagues were envious of him, and his success.

In conclusion.

Dr George Handy has been the Physician from whom I learnt most of my medicine, during my medical student years. Three years after graduation, it was my remarkable and unequalled privilege to have worked under Dr Handy at Colombo General Hospital. He is the greatest Physician I have ever known. Cardiology was his main area of special interest, but he was an authority in every aspect of General Medicine. That such a great man could have come from Jaffna, having his almost entire schooling at St John's College, Jaffna, and then outshine in Colombo, all the medical talent from the whole of our country, makes me feel proud that I too am from Jaffna, and that I too studied at St John's College, Jaffna.

In a letter written by Dr Handy's daughter Kanti to Mr Percy Handv. she quotes her father, saying, - Whatever I have achieved in the medical profession is mainly due to the influence of two mothers - my own dear mother and my Alma Mater. ' A measure of his stature can be gauged from the fact that his friends and relations, past students & patients and other doctors have planned to put up a 3 storeyed ward in the premises of the General Hospital, Colombo to be named the -Dr G.R.Handy Memorial Ward' to commemorate his services to the medical profession. St John's can be truly be proud of this great son of hers. May the turf lie lightly over him. - Editor