

# Dialogue with the Stalwart

## Interview with Dr. Shanta V

Interviewed by Dr. Thilaka Muthiah, Assistant Professor, Chettinad Hospital & Research Institute, Kelambakkam, Tamilnadu, India.

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When one enters a hospital dedicated to the cure and care of cancer patients, one expects to see patients who are depressed, dejected and frustrated and staff and workers equally strained from witnessing continuous suffering. On the contrary, what one sees on visiting Cancer Institute is entirely different. Most of the patients were aware of what they were going through; still they were very confident about the treatment given and more importantly they radiated a positive attitude towards life. The OPD is flooded with patients; still the staff take time to enquire what without getting irritated. Dr. V. Shanta is the Chairman of the Cancer Institute and has played a pivotal role in its development since its inception. She hails from a distinguished scientific family; her grandfather and uncle Sir C.V.Raman and Dr. S. Chandrasekhar are Nobel Laureates. Dr. Shanta is the recipient of the Magsaysay award in 2005, Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan and many other awards for her undeterred and selfless service to humanity. The Magsaysay award citation is worth quoting to describe aptly Dr. Shanta's service. It reads in part:

"In an era when specialised medical care in India has become highly commercialised, Dr. Shanta strives to ensure that the Institute remains true to its ethos, 'Service to all.' Its services are free or subsidised for some 60 per cent of its 100,000 annual patients [...] Seventy-eight-year-old Shanta still sees patients, still performs surgery, and is still on call twenty-four hours a day."

**What prompted you to take up medicine as a profession, considering the fact that in those days medicine was not a usual option for women?**

Wanting to become a doctor was my first and last choice. The decision was made during the time of schooling, in the 4th form (these days 9th standard) where we had to choose an optional.

**What inspired you to join Cancer Institute and take up Oncology?**

After completing MD in Obstetrics and Gynecology, I had a few options open. But it is mainly destiny and opportunity that made me join here. I really have no idea. I think it is God send and I have no regrets ever since. My first posting during House Surgeoncy was to the Cancer Unit under Dr.S.Krishnamurthi.

**Can you share a few words about Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy?**

Amma (that is how she refers to Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy) is one of the greatest ladies India has ever had. Though the time I spent with amma was brief as she was old by the time I joined, I had the unique opportunity and honour to work in close association with her. In fact I've worked with her son Dr. Krishnamurthy for almost five and a half decades. Dr. Krishnamurthi is the architect of what the Cancer Institute (WIA) is today. I am what I am because of him.

When the 1st national flag was hoisted on our Independence Day, it had the names of 7 people who contributed a lot to the country. Amma's name was in that list. She was the 1st lady medical graduate from India and the first woman Vice President of the Legislative Council. She lost her sister due to cancer in 1923. That is when she found that there were no facilities in India to treat cancer patients. Cancer Institute is her dream come true. We owe a great deal to her thoughts, deeds, commitment and dedication. She was the President of the Women's Indian Association. She is the one who started the Cancer Relief Fund.

**How do you see the development of the Institute?**

We just started as a 12 bedded hospital with the idea of doing something for the poor. We had to grow to keep in pace with the rapidly growing technology and scientific knowledge. This growth is not without obstacles and difficulties because from the time of inception it has been difficult to make people understand the need for a dedicated cancer hospital.

As the hospital was accessible and patients got better, more and more patients started coming to get treated. We have a lot of firsts to our credit like installation of the first supervoltage radiation unit in Asia, first Linear Accelerator in India, first and only Intraoperative Radiotherapy (IORT) facility in India, first Paediatric Oncology Centre in the country, introduction of DM and MCh superspeciality courses etc. and we still are pioneers in most of the fields in oncology. Our ethos is "Service to all without social or economic divide" and "Service above self". Till date whatever be the hindrance, we have not paid a single rupee 'under the table' to anyone. Our staffs are also trained in the same way. We have grown with difficulty, but we are very happy to be honest and clean. When I go to sleep I am very clear that I've done my best.

**Can you recall a satisfying and memorable moment?**

There are multiple. The best reward one can get is when a child you treat grows up, completes education, gets married and comes back to see you. We can measure success or failure using four variables- 1.Care 2.Cure 3.Control and 4.Research.

Today we can cure 1 out of 3 patients who come to us. If they come at an early stage, we can cure 2 out of 3 patients, which is a big thing. To make sure the balance 1 gets treated, we need to concentrate on research. We need to have on-going research for progress. As for the patients who cannot be cured, we need to give them care, make them happy, so that they can die in dignity instead of dying in suffering.

#### How did you feel when they announced the Magsaysay award?

It was fantastic (she laughs and recollects it just like it happened yesterday). It was a Tuesday evening at 6.30 p.m. Dr. Krishnamurthy and I were having a discussion after returning from the operation theatre. In fact he attended the phone call and handed it over to me saying it was from Philippines. I was so overwhelmed and had nothing to say except that I was honoured and privileged. Seeing my reaction, Dr. Krishnamurthy asked if it was the Magsaysay award when I put the phone down. He was happier than I was and rightly said that I am getting it on behalf of the Institute and the entire team. It is definitely an added feather to the Institute.

#### In one of your previous interviews you've mentioned that only with time will we know the impact of the Magsaysay award on the Institute. Has it made any positive impact?

Nothing. I am being treated with great respect. Most awards have no meaning for me. Public do not respond to the Institute. Honouring me doesn't help. People should honour the cause and mission for which we are struggling. We've not been able to make any extra money for the institution. It is becoming increasingly difficult to tackle the cost of drugs and research with the limited support we generate. The number of underprivileged that we can support is minimal compared to the overall needs of the community. People must come forward to help and donate to fight cancer, to provide education, to help patients get treatment.

#### Have you seen changes in cancer prognosis over time?

There is an enormous change. We have moved from an era of incurability to an era of curability. More importantly we also know ways to prevent cancer. Way back in 1955, we did not have a single child who survived 6 months after detecting cancer. Today almost 60% of the children go back normal and lead normal lives, which is an achievement. If you take osteosarcomas, amputation was the only available treatment years back. I still remember a patient Varnakula Surya from Colombo. He had a bone tumour refused amputation. I told him about Douglas Bade, the ace pilot of Britain battle who had only artificial limbs. He still refused amputation and we lost him. Today there is no need for amputation and we do limb salvage surgeries. Similarly for breast cancer, laryngeal tumours and a number of other cancers we do organ conserving surgeries.

#### What do you want to tell the young doctors?

Be proud of your Institute and do everything to make your Institute proud of you. How many Indians are proud about their country? That is where we fail. If you are not happy about something then try to do something to improve it. Try to work as a team and think of making a difference. It need not be for the entire nation. You can definitely make a change to a patient, to a group, to a community.

Take up something as a mission and motive in life. We had wonderful teachers. Teaching is not great these days and the students mind is not trained to think. Read about great people. The worst thing a young mind can get exposed to is a corrupt environment- about that, only God knows what we can do!

