

## Our Chancellor – Dr. P. R. Anthonis

B. A. Abeywickrama

*The Ceylon Journal of Medical Science 2002; 45: 1-3*

Dr. Polwattearachchige Romiel Anthonis has an almost unbroken, three- scores-and-ten years association with the University of Colombo and its predecessors. He has the happy gift of winning the affection and respect of all those who have anything to do with him – be they colleagues, students, friends, patients or subordinates. Eminent as he is, he has the humility to see himself in perspective. His simplicity is almost proverbial; you still see him going about in his old Morris Minor Saloon.

Dr. Anthonis was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 1911. He had a very distinguished career at St. Peter's College, Bambalapitiya. In December 1926, a leading newspaper reported that "there were tremendous cheers when young P. R. Anthonis walked up to the platform to receive five prizes". Two years later, in 1928, he won eight prizes – General Proficiency, English, Latin, French, Mathematics, Chemistry, Geography and History. In the early 1930s he entered the Ceylon Medical College where he passed all examinations coming first with a 1<sup>st</sup> Class in all examinations winning the Loos Gold Medal for Pathology, the Mathew Gold Medal for Forensic Medicine, the Rockwood Gold Medal for Surgery and the Government Diploma Medal. He has given in his own inimitable language a very full account of his Medical College days in an article "The Period of Incubation", in the Medical College Magazine of 1940 (1). He tries to take as little credit as possible for this brilliant record as a student. He says it was largely due to the untiring efforts of his parents and teachers who had spared no pains whatsoever to enable him to go on with his studies during a very difficult period in the country. He often says how deeply grateful he is to them for what they did during those difficult years.

Yes, the period 1911 to 1936 was indeed a very, very difficult one for the world and especially for Sri Lanka. The First World War from 1914 to 1918 and the Declaration of Martial Law over the island after the Riots in 1915 were some of the early problems. A few years later came the Great Depression. In the years 1920 to 1933 the market prices of tea, rubber and coconut totally collapsed. A pound of plucked green tea leaves from smallholder's gardens fetched only two-and-a-half cents. Paddy fell to seventy-five cents a bushel and the price of one thousand coconuts came down to fifteen rupees! Rich landowners, businessmen, professionals and workers were all equally affected.

Next came the malaria epidemic of 1934. This has been referred to as "the greatest pestilence in the recorded history of the island". It is said that it destroyed 80,000 lives in about seven months (2). That was the situation in Sri Lanka during Dr. Anthonis' student days. My student days began in 1924 and I have vivid recollections of the problems of the period.

With the successful completion of his undergraduate medical studies in 1936, he was awarded the Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (L.M.S.) by the Medical College. After an years internship on an allowance of Rs. 150/= p.m., he joined the Government Department of Health in April 1938 as an Assistant Medical Officer at the Anti-Tuberculosis Hospital in Ragama. The following year he came to the Colombo General Hospital as Surgical Registrar. He was the first non-FRCS to hold this post. During this period he taught medical students, acted for visiting staff, and operated at the General Hospital. In August 1941 he was sent as House Officer to Avissawella. The following year he was appointed Surgeon at Trincomalee during the Japanese Air Raid. In July

1. *Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Colombo.*

1943 he was made the House Surgeon at Civil Hospital, Galle.

In that same year, he came to the Faculty of Medicine of the newly established University of Ceylon as a Demonstrator in Anatomy. It was at this time that I first met Dr. Anthonis. We met at a Block-Nite Social. I was invited there by the Medical Students with whom I had been very closely associated when they followed the first M.B. courses in earlier years at the Science Faculty, Colombo.

On January 21<sup>st</sup> 1943, Dr. Anthonis' 32<sup>nd</sup> birthday, he married Miss Lilian Ruby Perera of Kitulgala. She was a very kind-hearted, generous and charming lady who was for many, many years a very great asset and excellent companion to Dr. Anthonis. Two years later, he went on study leave to England accompanied by his wife. When he was there, Lilian presented him with their baby boy, Lal, – who is today one of the most outstanding wild-life photographers in Sri Lanka, and the author of many books on the island. On completion of Dr. Anthonis' post-graduate studies, the Royal College of Surgeons (England) conferred on him their Fellowship.

Late in 1947 all three returned to Sri Lanka. Dr. Anthonis was appointed Visiting Surgeon at the General Hospital, Colombo. I too went over to England for further studies in 1946 and came back three years later. Shortly afterwards, I got married, and my wife Pulsara, told me that Lilian and she had been classmates and close friends at St. Bridget's Convent, Colombo. Early in 1950 Lilian invited us to her parental home for a long weekend where we were very warmly and lavishly entertained. They even arranged a very pleasant and enjoyable trip to Adam's Peak. Many groups of medical students have also enjoyed their hospitality at Kitulgala. After a swim in the Kelani Ganga and a sumptuous meal, they have often had impromptu entertainment. At least on one occasion Dr. Anthonis had given a violin solo recital. The students remember that as one of their most enjoyable outings.

Dr. Anthonis continued to serve at the General Hospital where he became Consultant Surgeon

and later the Senior Surgeon. He never failed to arrive at the non-paying wards sharp at 8 o'clock in the mornings. He made no distinction as to paying and non-paying patients. He also continued his work as a Teacher and Examiner at the Medical Faculty. As a University Teacher, he was very closely associated with his students. To them he was a guide, philosopher and friend. He was always ready to give a helping hand to any student who was in need. He retired from Government Service in 1971. This retirement was no retreat into inactivity. He continued to work as a Consultant Surgeon and carried out the consultations in a separate section in his own home. The only difference was that he carried out his operations not at the General Hospital but in other hospitals. He even continued to serve as an Examiner for post-graduate examinations held here in Sri Lanka. Today at the age of 91, he still works from early morning and late into the night relieving grateful patients of their ailments which respond to scalpels. After his retirement from Government Service he has carried out over 38,000 surgical operations. Among his patients have been the highest in the land and the most eminent religious dignitaries, as well as ordinary men and women. He is reputed to be the oldest practising surgeon in Asia.

Dr. Anthonis has wide interests. His large collection of very rare books on Sri Lanka include several first editions. He is specially interested in the early history of hospitals. Many years ago when we were discussing this subject, he showed me some literature which stated that it was to the Gautama Buddha and his followers that we owe the "houses for the sick" concept; and that from about 500 B.C. onwards Buddhist hospitals were "perpetually being built by victorious rulers, monasteries, or by individuals".

Dr. Anthonis is a practising Buddhist. While at the Medical Faculty, he was President of the Buddhist Brotherhood. Today he is a Senior Member of the Board of Governors of the YMBA, and of the Board of Trustees of the Vajiraramaya. He is also the Chairman of the Cheshire Homes in Sri Lanka. He contributes very generously to deserving charities, irrespective of their religious denominations.

He has done much to promote friendly relations between countries. He is one of the persons who has done most to promote good relations between Sri Lanka and Japan. For the last thirty years he has been the President of the Japan International Co-operation Alumni Association. He was also the Founder Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Sasakawa Memorial, Sri Lanka – Japan Cultural Centre, and Vice-President of the International Friendship Society.

For several years he was a member of the Health Council in the island and in 1967 he was elected President of the Ceylon Medical Association. In 1981 he was appointed Chairman of the Sri Lanka Medical Council. He is the Founder-President of the College of Surgeons of Sri Lanka and is now one of its Honorary Fellows. He has also been awarded Fellowships from the College of General Practitioners, the College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the College of Physicians. In 1991 he was awarded the Honorary Fellowship of the International Medical Sciences Academy by its President, Narasimha Rao.

When the Government of Sri Lanka commenced the conferring of National Honours in 1986, Dr. Anthonis was the first recipient of the highest honour, "Deshamanya". He also received from His Majesty the Emperor of Japan the prestigious "Order of the Sacred Treasure", a rare honour bestowed only to a very select few.

In 1981 his *alma mater* conferred on him the greatest honour it could offer, he was made the Chancellor of the University. He was also awarded the Degree of Doctor of Science *Honoris Causa*. Ten years later, when Dr. Anthonis conferred an Honorary Degree to a retiring Professor who had once been a student of his, the recipient in his address said that he valued the award very much because of "the fact that this award is given through your hands, Chancellor, not just because yours are the hands of a professional colossus, but because you are a supreme human being for whom my reverence is boundless".

The most admirable characteristic in Dr. Anthonis is his great devotion to duty. And what is his duty? Sixty-six years ago he received what he refers to as "the divine gift" and "the fanatic of yesterday is a philosopher today". That day he took a pledge. What was this pledge? – The Oath of Hippocrates – "Houses I enter I go there for the benefit of the sick". To honour that pledge has been Dr. Anthonis' lifelong endeavour.

#### References

1. Anthonis P.R. The period of incubation. Ceylon Medical College Magazine. Reprinted in Ceylon Medical Students Journal – Centenary Issue 1970: pp 66-69.
2. Kurukulasuriya G. Cooperation – Its Rise and Growth in Ceylon. Vidyalankara Press, Kelaniya. 1971; pp 63, 65.