

Dialogue with the Stalwart

Interview with Dr.R.Venkataswami

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Chettinad Health City Medical Journal 2012; 1(4): 200 - 201



Achievements!!! When the ingredients of success are given in the right proportion, many people tend to achieve...few people struggle their way out and finally achieve even when they are given just the basic requirements...exceptional people do not require anything; they start from scratch and make tremendous, unbelievable achievements! This issue we met one such exceptional person who dared to dream big and devoted his tireless and selfless work not only to make his dreams come true, but also to add another valuable asset to the health care system of our country. Prof. R. Venkataswami started the Plastic Surgery department in Stanley Medical College in 1971 when plastic surgery was just at its infancy in India. In 1973, he started the Hand Injury Service Centre, which was the first in the country. Today, the Institute for Research and Rehabilitation of the Hand and Department of Plastic Surgery in Stanley Medical College is one of the best in the world because of his extraordinary commitment and efficient team. Like great teachers always do, he did not produce students and followers, he produced teachers and leaders who continue to carry the torch all over the country. He is the Founder President of the Indian Society for Reconstructive Microsurgery and the Brachial Plexus Surgery Group of India. He has been invited many a time to deliver lectures throughout the world. He has authored various chapters in renowned text books and has numerous publications in international journals to his credit. He has also innovated quite a few operations in the field of hand surgery. Recognising his academic contributions several awards were given to him.

- He was given the Hon. Fellowship of Royal College of Surgeon Edinburg in the year 1991. (He is the First Plastic Surgeon from this county to get this award).
- He was elected as honorary member of the British Association of Plastic Surgery (Second Indian to be elected).
- He was awarded several prestigious orations and lectures from UK and USA.
- He was given the Hon. DSC from Tamilnadu Medical University.
- He was the visiting professor in Hand Surgery to the world famous Hand Surgery centre in Louistille USA in the year 1998. (First Indian to be Invited)
- Crowning it all was the award of "Pioneer in Hand Surgery at the International level by the International Federation of Hand Societies at its meeting held at Budapest in 2005. (First Indian Plastic Surgeon to get

How did your sixty years of successful medical career begin?

I hail from a small village called Kothaneri near Virudhunagar. My parents were simple rural folk, Gandhian in outlook and very principled. I did my schooling from Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya at Perianaikanpalayam Coimbatore, which shaped my character and inculcated in me many values. In fact I came to Madras hoping to join B.A Economics Hons in Loyola College; however it was my destiny that the last date of medical application was postponed and I attended the interview and got selected. The only reason I chose to join Stanley Medical College was because my middle school's Headmaster's name was Stanley. I cannot forget my teacher Mr. Ayyavoo in that school who prepared me to join the Ramakrishna Vidyalayam.

How did you develop interest in plastic surgery?

A. It was Prof.A.S.Ramakrishnan who developed my interest in surgery during my undergraduate days. In 1956, as a final year undergraduate student I listened to a lecture by Sir.Harold Gillies, a world renowned plastic surgeon at Madras Medical College. His pioneering work on reconstructive surgery greatly inspired me. After my post graduation in Surgery from Stanley Medical College, I went to Nagpur to pursue MCh in plastic surgery.

What prompted you to start up a Hand Surgery unit in Government Stanley Hospital in 1974?

The interest in hand trauma was created in me by my guru Prof.C.Balakrishnan at Nagpur. Hand trauma was my thesis for MCh Plastic Surgery. When I returned to Madras there was only one plastic surgery unit in Madras Medical College and so I wished to start a separate unit in Stanley Medical College. The proposal for plastic surgery unit was sanctioned by the government against all odds. Our unit was inaugurated on Jan 26th 1971. The Stanley casualty received more than 3000 cases in 1971. I thought it is a good opportunity to contribute something new and good to the community which was my father's advice. This made me to develop a Hand Injury Service, the first of its kind in the country.

What are the supports you got when you had the new idea? Was the idea received well by the government?

Being the first of its kind in our country, Hand Injury Service was well appreciated by the Government, the Dean and others. What was started as a small department of 20 beds and 18 staff members at Stanley became a National Institute with 80 beds and 107 staff members. This was surely due to the quality of work done by my colleagues.

What were the obstacles you faced?

I had problems getting a ward, adequate staff and equipments. The secret of success is to make the proposal as economic as possible and utilise the available resources to the maximum. The philosophy I practiced was to make the best use of what is available and possible. Your work should speak for you and keep knocking at the doors of the government with your work and I am sure it will be answered positively.

Did you foresee that Stanley Hospital will be one of the World's best hand surgery units with so many referral cases?

No I just started with the idea of doing something new and useful to the society. But it turned out to be one of the leading centres. The credit goes to the entire team.

What did you do to ensure the success of your Hand Injury Service?

I noticed that precious time was lost in shifting the patient from Emergency Department due to unwanted meddling of the wound by the casualty team. This is common in all emergency rooms in all hospitals. To avoid this, a broad red line was painted from the Emergency Department to our Hand Injury Service and the patient was asked to "follow the red line". There, they were immediately received and registered by a 24x7 team and later examined and taken for treatment in a separate emergency theatre carved out of a veranda. Following this they were either admitted or treated as outpatient for full rehabilitation.

How did you develop interest in Reconstructive microsurgery? Can you share with us about the Indian Society for Reconstructive Microsurgery which you started in 1992, you being the Founder President.

In 1976, a renowned plastic surgeon by name Dr. Peter Nathan from USA visited our department and demonstrated small vessel anastomosis with a operating microscope borrowed from the ENT department. I realised that microsurgery was essential in the progress of reconstructive surgery. Soon an operating microscope was obtained. Our first replant was a thumb in 1979 and free tissue transfer in 1981. I felt that a separate forum was required to discuss the various advances in microsurgery and hence I started the Indian Society for Reconstructive Microsurgery in 1992.

Can you share a few words about your teachers and inspirations?

A. I was lucky to have good teachers guiding me all through my career. I can never forget my 6th standard teacher Mr. Ayyavoo who took extraordinary interest in guiding me for higher studies and later in the High school Swami Nishkamananda guided me to go to the Arts College. In Stanley my teacher Prof. A.S. Ramakrishnan who was a man of high ethics and perfection and Prof. C. Balakrishnan who was my teacher in Naggur where I pursued MCh in Plastic Surgery were great stalwarts who inspired me to be a good doctor and a surgeon. Every day I remember all of them in my prayers.

How do you look at your students? Are they carrying your thoughts forward?

Yes I am very happy that some of my students like Dr. Balakrishnan, Dr. Sridhar, Dr. Mukunda Reddy and Dr. Rajasabathy are doing excellently well in their chosen fields. All the above head the various academic associations such as Association of Plastic Surgeon of India, Indian Society for Hand Surgery and Indian Society for Reconstructive Microsurgery.

What is your most memorable moment in life?

It was a great honour to deliver the McIndoe Lecture for 1998 in the Royal College of Surgeons of England. I wish to share one incident of my life. My car which was with me for 20 years refused to start on the last day of my retirement when I had to depart Stanley Medical College, as if even it was not willing to leave the Institute. My assistant drove me home in his vehicle.

How were your college days in Stanley? What does the institution mean to you?

College days in Stanley were wonderful. I was the Student Council Secretary in 1953. I was interested in staging various full length plays. I have acted as Subramaniya Bharathi in connection with AICC session held at Madras. I did my undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Stanley and later chose to work after my MCh Plastic Surgery in my parent institution by organising the Hand and Plastic Surgery Department and I continued for 20 years till my retirement. So Stanley is always close to my heart.

How is your life after the days in Stanley College? How do you engage your time now?

It was never a retirement for me after my service in Stanley. Now I head the Department of Reconstructive Surgery in Apollo First Med Hospital and train DNB graduates. I am involved as a Chairman of Gandhi Niketan Ashram, a welfare institution for the needy in rural India at Kallupatti Madurai District. I spend my leisure to plan and work for them.

You have inspired many generations of medical students. What do you advice the present generation?

The students should have their goals right and work for it with focussed attention. They must follow medical ethics and avoid malpractices. Each one should have a social responsibility and must contribute something useful to the society which made him the doctor.

What are your contributions to the field of Reconstructive surgery?

A. I had great opportunity at Stanley. I had the first Hand Injury Service started in the country in 1974. Similarly I had the first Microsurgical service in the country in 1988. Later I found the Indian Society for Reconstructive Microsurgery in 1992 and Brachial Plexus Surgery Group of India in 2004. I had authored and edited an exclusive hand surgery book published in the year 2008.