
DESHAMANYA DR. P. R. ANTHONIS

LMS (CEYLON), FRCS (ENGLAND)

Born: 21st January 1911

Died: 17th December 2009



It is difficult for the modern doctor to understand the ability and skills and achievements of medical practitioners of the era of Dr. Anthonis.

He passed out as a doctor in 1936 when the pharmacopoeia consisted of lotions, powders and mixtures. Antibiotics were unknown (Penicillin was discovered two years after he went to UK to train as a surgeon). Intravenous anaesthesia was discovered only just (Chloroform was discovered in 1864). There were no intensive care units (all postoperative care even for very major surgery was in a general ward), no monitors of any kind, only X-rays were available for imaging, no flexible endoscopes, blood transfusion was in its infancy, and all laboratory tests were carried out manually. The era of antibiotics, intensive care, monitors, imaging, automation, and pharmacological advances burst into the medical scene from 1950 up to the present time. It is to Dr. Anthonis' credit that he kept pace with these advances, kept abreast of the literature and continuously updated himself with new techniques and operations. An anecdote related to me by late Dr. R. L. A Jayaweera, Consultant Anaesthetist of the Whittington Hospital, London

illustrates this well. Dr. Jayaweera's house was "home from home" to many a Sri Lankan doctor. Some time in the late 1970s, Dr. Anthonis had visited London and enjoyed Dr. Raja's and his wife Hazel's hospitality. At the same time another Sri Lankan postgraduate attending a course was also staying in his house. It was winter time. When Dr. Jayaweera had got up at 6.00a.m as was his habit, he heard sounds from the room Dr. Anthonis was staying in, and he was surprised to see Dr. Anthonis come out fully dressed. On enquiring as to where he was going at this early hour, Dr. Anthonis's reply had been, "I say Raja, Norman Tanner's unit at St. James Hospital is doing a highly selective vagotomy at eight and I do not want to miss a single step of the operation". He had to walk in the cold to the tube station to get to the hospital. Dr. Raja added that the postgraduate on the other hand had gone to sleep till late because of the cold and had "cut" that day's lectures and demonstrations!

To a large extent he was a self taught man. He spent the years 1945 to 1947 passing the Primary and soon after the FRCS examination, and working as a surgical registrar in hospitals in London.

On his return he was appointed surgeon to the General Hospital, Colombo (now The National Hospital of Sri Lanka), from where he retired in 1971.

The variety of surgical operations was wide as there were no "Finer specialists" at that time. Head and neck surgery including malignancies, thyroidectomy, oesophagectomy, chest surgery, surgery for portal hypertension, mastectomies, gastrectomies, cholecystectomies, colectomies, AP resections, all

urological operations including open prostatectomy, pancreatic surgery etc were part of a routine surgical list.

Amongst his patients were ambassadors and diplomats, leading businessmen, politicians, ministers and heads of state and the common man. He claimed that he had operated on every head of state of Sri Lanka except the last two! Contrary to popular belief he did not charge high fees, and many of his operations were done free of charge. His nephew, Mr. Dharmasiri Peiris, Civil Servant and a former Secretary to the Cabinet recalled how Dr. Anthonis would invite relatives and others to his room and open a wardrobe full of suit lengths, new shirts, ties, perfumes etc. inviting them to help themselves to whatever they fancied. These were apparently gifts from those on whom he had done operations free of charge. He recalled that in the words of Livingstone, "he did not die a rich man, but he led a very rich life".

He had his share of surgical rivals waiting to pounce on him in case of complications or deaths. At a surgical meeting he narrated how he had to re operate on the famed singer Sunil Shantha, who had developed hoarseness following thyroidectomy carried out by another surgeon. Mr. Sunil Shantha had expressed his gratitude in the newspapers for which Dr. Anthonis was reported to the Ceylon Medical Council! He later went on to become the Chairman of this Council.

There were many reasons for his success.

The first is undoubtedly his intellectual brilliance. At St. Peter's College where he had his primary education he carried away virtually every prize.

At the University College (later the Colombo Medical Faculty), he again topped the batch at every examination and was awarded the Loos Gold Medal (Pathology), the Mathew Gold Medal (Forensic Medicine), Rockwood Gold Medal (Surgery).

The next attribute was his picture book knowledge of the anatomy of the human form. This coupled

with his avid reading of the surgical literature helped him to unravel the most complex surgical problems. He traveled across the world to watch experts operate to learn from their techniques. He was very modest since most of these surgeons could have learned a trick or two by watching him operate! However, he maintained that these visits helped him to improve on his techniques since he watched everything critically, noting the positive and negative aspects he saw.

His memory for surgical topics and procedures was also amazing.

The third attribute for Dr. Anthonis' success was his boundless capacity for work. He would often say "a mother will never forgive you if you refuse to see her son at midnight complaining of abdominal pain". He was available at all times to any patient. In the 50s and even 60s, he would travel to Galle or Kandy to operate on patients too ill to travel to Colombo. He also came to the rescue of many a surgeon who had complications following surgery. He probably has the largest series of corrections to surgical damage of the common bile duct. These were carried out without the second and third generation antibiotics, and endoscopic, stenting and imaging facilities that we now enjoy. Unfortunately these went unpublished.

However, he was meticulous in keeping notes on every operation he carried out whether it was big or small, in a large register. Most of his operations were graphically illustrated with beautiful diagrams with footnotes explaining the significance. Some of these registers will be gifted to medical libraries by his son, Lal.

And he had time. It is said that to the lazy man there is always no time but for the busy man there is always some time. He had time to consult, time to operate, and time to attend weddings, funerals, meetings lectures, and scientific sessions and time to do all this often within the space of a day. He served as Chancellor of the University for a record

period of 21 years. He had time to attend every Convocation and to stand for hours wishing every graduate with a smile and a word of advice.

He was President of the Sri Lanka Medical Association in 1967 and continued to serve the Association by attending most Orations and meetings, always giving that extra bit of encouragement to young orators for their scientific work. He was also Editor of *The Ceylon Medical Journal*.

The surgical fraternity has much to be grateful for Dr. Anthonis.

He was the Founder President of The College of Surgeons of Sri Lanka in 1974. Ever since the Primary FRCS examination was held in Sri Lanka it was traditional that the President of the Royal College of Surgeons of England came with the examiners or as one of them. It was also traditional that they would host all the Sri Lankan Fellows to a dinner. To reciprocate this and to host the visiting team to dinner was a prerogative of Dr. Anthonis. He invited all the Sri Lankan examiners and even his circle of friends to these lavish parties which only he could afford to host. He had a wide circle of surgeon friends from the UK as a result. He continued with this annual tradition till the mid eighties until Dr. Stephen, the Chairman of the Board of Study in Surgery and I, the then Secretary decided that it was unfair to let one person to foot the bill and it has since then been hosted by the Council of the College, in spite of Dr. Anthonis' protests. These dinners were very important because this gave us an opportunity to chat up these Consultants from the UK to get jobs and placements for our trainee surgeons.

As President of the Medical Specialists Association he fought by the side of the Government Medical Officers Association and won the right to private practice, a privilege all doctors should be grateful to him for.

As I have recalled earlier, young surgeons could certainly learn a lot from Dr. Anthonis's life. While being modest of his own achievements, he never spoke ill of a colleague. The number of times he has removed retained surgical swabs left by other surgeons is very significant, but apart from mentioning it to the surgeon if he met him, it remained his secret. I once asked him why he did not publish the series of common bile duct injuries he had repaired. His answer was "if any surgeon is identified, it could ruin his career, we all make mistakes".

His fees were modest, always aware of the financial difficulties that families could get into. "I lead a comfortable life; I do not want to build my happiness on another person's unhappiness or misery".

He was never arrogant to patients however much they taxed his patience. Even at 2 a.m. he has been known to have the time and patience to explain the operation to anxious relatives before leaving the hospital.

He maintained records which he said he laboriously maintained hand written with diagrams every night before retiring to bed.

He took an interest in the future of the medical profession and surgeons. He was actively involved in the affairs of the SLMA and more especially the College of Surgeons of Sri Lanka. He believed in giving more than he had received from the profession.

He was an avid believer in Continuing Professional Development and kept abreast of the literature. His favourite journal was the *Annals of the College of Surgeons of Edinburgh*. Whenever we met in a Hospital he would often ask "I say Sheriffdeen, what do you think of this article in the *Edin annals*?" I often had to say that I had not read it and would proceed to the SLMA library at the next available time, to read the Journal.

He also had interests outside surgery. He was for many years the Founder President of the Sri Lanka

Japan Friendship Society. He was an authority on antiquities of Sri Lanka, the history of Sri Lanka and Buddhism. He led a full life.

He has been awarded the National honour of Deshamanya by the President for service to the country, the Vishwapradashini award by the Prime Minister and an International Award, The Order of the Golden Peacock by the Emperor of Japan. The Japanese community in Sri Lanka held him in high esteem. A Japanese mother once brought her son to me with abdominal pain. He had all the symptoms, signs and haematological evidence to support a diagnosis of acute appendicitis. This was also confirmed by the resident Japanese embassy doctor. When the mother was told that her son needed an operation, she asked through the

interpreter where Dr. Anthonis was. She was told that he was out of Colombo and would not be available for another couple of days. Her immediate reply was "in that case I am taking my son to Japan for the operation"!

The amazing list of his achievements is but a few. His knowledge of the History of Sri Lanka, History of medicine, of antiquities, wildlife and the postwar personalities of Ceylon enabled him to hold his own with the scholars at any conversation.

We have lost a skilful surgeon, an ambassador for the surgical fraternity and a surgeon and friend to the highest and to the lowest.

May he be granted his rewards in the hereafter.

A. H. Sheriffdeen