

Inaugural Dr. Stella de Silva Memorial Oration

“Looking back, at a dazzling star”

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The President of the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians, Chairperson and Members of the Board of Trustees of the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians, Past Presidents, Fellows and Members of the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians, Members of the family of late Dr. Stella de Silva, Distinguished Invitees. Mr. President, thank you so much, for those very kind, generous and superlative words of introduction. They are of course very deeply appreciated.

It was sometime in the late nineteen sixties that, yours truly, as a very ordinary medical student, met an imposing and distinguished personality by the name of Dr. Stella de Silva. That raw medical student, never ever dreamt, even in his wildest dreams, that many a year later, he would be delivering the Inaugural Dr. Stella de Silva Memorial Oration. I consider it to be a great honour, a singular privilege and certainly an accolade bestowed on someone who has the highest regard for this lady who was absolutely unique in very many respects. In that context, I am ever so grateful to the President and the Council of The Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians, and to the family members of the late Dr. Stella de Silva, for selecting me to deliver this Inaugural Oration. The only claim that I could possibly profess to this honour is the fact that I worked rather closely with the great lady and I have unmitigated affection, tremendous regard and absolute respect for her. I also know for sure that these were amply reciprocated by her.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I stand here, in all humility, to pay a regal tribute, to a dazzling star in the medical scenario in the bygone days of this resplendent isle. In conformity with tradition, at this Inaugural Oration, I will be concentrating mainly on the life and work of Dr. Stella de Silva and would be referring, perhaps only just in passing, to some of my own work. In opening my heart to the task at hand, I

must confess that I have kept under wraps, a magnificent obsession, which I have harboured silently for a number of years. That was to deliver the Dr. Stella de Siva Memorial Oration, if and when it came about. This hour is the fulfilment of that dream. It is perhaps quite a special realisation of that dream as it is the Inaugural Oration.

At the outset, I must affirm that some of the information that I will refer to regarding Dr. Stella de Silva has been taken from the book “Pathways to the Peak, Remarkable Stories from Pioneering Sri Lankan Women”.

Stella Gertrude de Silva was born on the 2nd of June 1918 in Randombe, Balapitiya in Southern Sri Lanka, to Mr. C.R. de Silva, a well-known lawyer and Mrs. Adeline de Silva.

Stella was the fourth of six children and the younger of the two daughters that they were blessed with. In her very early years Stella studied at Prajapathy Vidyalaya, a local school in Ambalangoda. She did revel in going to school in a bullock cart, a standard form of vehicular transport at that time, and came home to play with her five siblings as well as the many cousins who lived nearby. At the age of seven years, the parents sent Stella and her elder sister Gladys to Southlands College, Galle, a leading girls’ school in the region. One would never believe it but young Stella had a mischievous streak in her. She was known regularly to manage to spoil her immaculate white school uniform with splashes of ink. However, she was an avid reader of books, a trait inculcated in her by her Vice-Principal, Edith Ridge, a Scottish lady.

Young Stella also had a burning ambition, which was to study medicine. In those distant days, it was unheard of for a young lady to take up medicine. Besides, it was ever so expensive. Her father had to educate five other children as well and the good man selected a teaching career for Stella. However, the young lady had the support of her oldest brother, Percy. He became a Civil Servant and even offered to help her, to follow her heart.

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There was another problem. There were no science facilities at Southlands College. That did not dampen the spirit of this determined young woman. She found out that it was possible to do the required science subjects at Richmond College, a neighbouring boys' school. The teaching staff at Southlands College supported her to the hilt and even offered to provide transport for her, to and from Richmond College. The young teenager just grabbed the opportunity and in fact made the most of it. It was that great American inventor, Thomas Edison, with 1093 patents to his name, who once said "*Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work*". Work was not a problem at all to young Stella.

Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish Philosopher, once wrote "*the block of granite which is an obstacle in the pathway of the weak, becomes a stepping-stone in the pathway of the strong*". With Stella, that certainly was the case. Academically, she was a shining star. However, she was not just a brilliant scholar in school, she was also an outright all-rounder. She was the Head Girl of Southlands College, a Girl Guide, and a sportsperson as well. She took part in netball, tennis and even horse-riding in school.

Junior Cambridge and Senior Cambridge examinations were pieces of cake for her. She was, as much of a high flying achiever, as anyone else before or after her.

She gained admission to the Ceylon Medical College in 1937, at the tender age of 19. For good measure, she also won a full scholarship and the issue of funding her university education was permanently resolved. That was not all..., she was also exempted from the first year pre-medical component that was a part of the six year medical course, quite a stunning accomplishment at that time. To cut a long story short, she absolutely outshone everyone else in the Medical College and qualified as a doctor in 1942. "A childhood dream come true", in the truest sense of the phrase.

Young Doctor Stella de Silva was groomed by many a reputed medical giant. She was particularly inspired by Dr. L.O. Abeyratne, the country's very first trained specialist paediatrician. In fact, it was just around the time that she worked under him, that Dr. Stella de Silva became acutely conscious of her talents for treating children.

The greatest of opportunities, once again based on unrivalled ability, came her way in 1952. The Ceylon Government, in full cognizance of her outstanding

abilities in paediatrics, sent her on a two year postgraduate scholarship to the United Kingdom to specialise in paediatrics. She trained for the first year in the Institute of Child Health of the University of London and the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children and the subsequent year at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School and Hammersmith Hospital. During this time, she just cruised through, and I mean, just simply cruised through the examinations for the Diploma in Child Health England, The Membership of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and The Membership of the Royal College of Physicians of London. These were three of the most prestigious qualifications that one could obtain from the United Kingdom. In fact, she was the very first woman from South East Asia to obtain the double MRCP.

She came back to Ceylon, as it was then known, in November 1954 and was appointed to the Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children. She was the Registrar, Resident Paediatrician of the Out Patients Department and Physician, in turn. Just two years after her return, in 1956, she secured the ultimate accolade. She got through the Doctorate in Medicine Examination of the University of Ceylon. She was then conferred with the coveted degree of MD (Ceylon).

In 1959, just five years after her return from England, she was appointed as the Consultant Paediatrician to the Lady Ridgeway Hospital and to the Castle Street Hospital for Women as well as the De Soysa Maternity Home. This was the start of that illustrious career as a Consultant Paediatrician in Sri Lanka.

These appointments gave her the opportunity to expand her work beyond many boundaries. She covered the work of Professor C.C. de Silva of the University Unit on many an occasion and took part in their teaching programmes at other times. When Professor C.C. de Silva retired, Stella was offered the position of Professor of Paediatrics in 1965. However, she elected to decline it, citing her vast professional commitments at the time as a potential impediment to taking over such a position.

Stella had an admirable passion for her own continuing professional development, even at that stage of her career. In 1967 she accepted a Fulbright Scholarship for one year to work as a Research Fellow in the renowned Babies Hospital in New York. She thoroughly enjoyed her stay in the United States and particularly the priceless exposure to sophisticated medical systems and advanced technology.

She kept right up to date with the most recent developments in paediatrics throughout her calling and was not afraid to use the latest knowledge to the complete benefit of her patients. Her encyclopaedic knowledge was indeed a boon to all around her. As a practising paediatrician, she strode the world of paediatrics in our country like a Trojan. Her academic brilliance, attention to detail, splendid diagnostic skills and unwavering commitment to excellence in anything that she touched, were indeed legendary. She gave of her very best to all, irrespective of caste, creed, religion or wealth. There are several generations of the populace of Sri Lanka who have reaped incomparable diagnostic and therapeutic benefits from her wonderful healing hands. There must be quite a few younger paediatricians who would have been treated by her during their childhood and some may even owe their lives to her. I personally know of at least one of them.

As for her work ethic, she once said "Dedication is most important. Also sacrifice. Unless you are going to work hard with dedication and no thought of your leisure and money, it is useless becoming a doctor. Earning money is important, but not the most important. Seeing an ill patient getting well is what is most important".

That quotation epitomises her life as a paediatrician. She was an exacting taskmaster in an unremitting pursuit towards providing the best possible care for her little patients. She made it a point to be committed to a singular quest towards providing state-of-the-art care for her little patients. Acute lymphoblastic leukaemia in children was virtually a death sentence at that time. Stella was one of very few paediatricians who pioneered treatment of children with that disease using UKALL 1 and UKALL 2 regimens.

One striking incident portrays the clinical acumen of this great paediatrician. A doctor from an out-station town had a baby who suffered from convulsions from very early infancy. The baby had been looked after by another paediatrician in Colombo. The malady had been diagnosed as hypocalcaemia and the convulsions responded to intravenous calcium gluconate every time. As the convulsions recurred and continued over a period of several months, the doctor brought his baby to Dr. Stella de Silva for a second opinion. The first thing Stella did was to put the baby on the couch and do a complete physical examination. It was the most fantastic example of getting "back to basics". She found a considerably enlarged liver. From then onwards, the problem was very simple for her incisive mind. She said that the

baby was probably hypoglycaemic and was responding not to the calcium component of calcium gluconate but to the gluconate bit of it. She said "next time there is a seizure, do a blood sugar and give intravenous dextrose". As she predicted, the blood sugar was low and the baby responded to intravenous glucose. The cause of the fits was hypoglycaemia. A liver biopsy confirmed the diagnosis as von Gierke's disease or in modern terminology, Glycogen Storage Disease Type I. The baby was appropriately treated and the problem was completely controlled. This just goes to show what a marvellous clinician she was.

At other times, she would just walk through a ward and order lumbar punctures on this one, that one etc. Needless to say, all were positive for meningitis. She just very simply diagnosed them from the nature of the cry. In those days, meningitis was a rampant disease in children.

Stella would also fearlessly stand up for injustice. In the early 1970s the government banned private practice for health ministry consultants. Stella was quite unhappy as she felt that her services would be denied to a segment of the population. A while later Stella was rung by the then Minister of Health and a request was made for her to see a new born baby at a Private Hospital.

She flatly refused because it was against the circular issued by the same Minister of Health. Stella simply said, "if you want me to see this child you have to admit the baby to my ward at Lady Ridgeway Hospital".

The new born was then admitted to her unit and the baby was extremely ill, dehydrated and at death's door. All the veins had been punctured at the private hospital and the baby was extremely dehydrated. The house officer, in desperation, requested the parents to purchase a scalp vein needle from the private sector as these were not available in the government hospitals. This was against another circular from the same Minister of Health prohibiting the issue of prescription for purchase of drugs or devices from the private sector. The parents got the needle and the enterprising house officer managed to start a drip, rehydrated the patient and saved the day. Stella came to see the child around 8.00 pm and the Minister of Health turned up half an hour later. By that time the baby was a lot better. Stella did not mince her words in telling the Minister that by a short sighted policy decision, they have deprived the services of consultants to needy patients in the private sector. She also said that if the house officer did not go against the circular and get the scalp vein needle, the

baby would not have survived. Then she did a full ward round till 11.00 in the night and made the Minister follow the ward round as well so that the Honourable Minister would get an idea, first hand, of the work done in the ward. That indeed was Stella, at her very best. I can vouch for the facts of the case as I was a MO-OPD in LRH at that time and the House Officer was Dr. Sarath De Silva, now a much respected Consultant Paediatrician.

Dr. Stella de Silva was a member of the extended academic arm of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo. In that position, she was responsible for teaching paediatric medicine to countless numbers of medical students. She also contributed in no small measure to the development and enhancement of paediatrics right throughout the country during her tenure of office as a Senior Paediatrician at The Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children. She was undoubtedly an academic of unstinted radiance. Incidentally, although it was a male dominated world at that time, particularly in medicine, she apparently had no problems with gender discrimination. Her simple philosophy was “if you are good, you will be accepted”. As a matter of fact, in her case, a glaring understatement of the century!

She was invited to deliver many Guest Lectures here and abroad and she published widely in national and international journals.

Dr. Stella de Silva continued with her work at Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children and retired in 1973 following over three decades of service to the children of Sri Lanka.

Following her retirement from the National Health Service and after a sojourn in private consultation practice, she set up the Department of Paediatrics of the North Colombo Medical College (NCMC) in 1985 and was the Founder Professor of Paediatrics in that institution. Several legions of medical students benefitted from her vast experience in that endeavour. She had that glorious gift of being able to teach in a way that rationalised the entire practice of paediatrics. Doctors in Sri Lanka, who have been exposed to her memorable teaching sessions, would vouch for the fact that whatever they learned from such a scholar of the art, they would remember, forever more. In the immortal words of Alfred Lord Tennyson, “I am a part of all that I have met”, many a medical practitioner of Sri Lanka would assure all and sundry that Stella had an abiding influence in shaping their careers and the way they work. She left an indelible impression on all those who came into contact with her.

Dr. Stella de Silva’s enormous contribution to the medical field has been recognised and honoured by an array of professional organisations. These honours included the Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and the Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians of London. In 1994, the Sri Lankan Government bestowed on her the National Honour of *Vidyajyothi* in cognizance of her exceptional contributions to science and medicine. Then in 1996, in a remarkable shift of the winds of fate, the Founder Presidency of the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians came my way. At the Inauguration Ceremony of the Annual Congress in 1997, I had the greatest honour of my life when I had to award the coveted Fellowship of The Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians to Dr. Stella de Silva. It was one of my most treasured moments. Madam Stella was the President of The Sri Lanka Medical Association in 1981/82. By another quirk of destiny, I am greatly privileged and tremendously honoured to hold that position this year.

My very first professional postgraduate contact with Dr. Stella de Silva was in 1971. She was the editor of the Ceylon Journal of Child Health when yours truly, as an intern medical officer, had the audacity to write-up and submit the very first scientific paper of his career, to her journal. That venture turned out to be the proverbial baptism by fire.

She sent me to Professor C.C. de Silva to review the paper. Between the two of them, they had a field day and in fact several field days. I had to cut, chop, amend, revise and manually type the script no less than seven times before it was acceptable to the great lady.

Those were the halcyon days before the internet, the medical databases and the word processors. It was hard labour, to say the least. One had to laboriously type on an old iron typewriter. One year later, that paper finally saw the light of day. From that time onwards, I have had occasion to publish many an article and the basic principles of scientific writing learnt at the feet of the *guru* has helped in no small measure in these endeavours. Very much later on, when I got a paper into the Archives of Disease in Childhood on a study that showed for the first time in the world that there were great cost benefits of using inhaled steroids for childhood asthma in developing countries¹, she was the first to telephone and congratulate me for that effort.

Yet for all that, I did, quite unwittingly, hurt her once. I was working in the LRH OPD in 1972 when a child of 15 years was brought for admission with a

scribbled note from a clinic. We were under strict instructions not to admit any child over 12 years. I referred the problem to the Chief Medical Officer in the OPD and he wrote “do not admit, refer to the General Hospital”. I did not know at that time, the scribbled note was from Stella. I explained the problem to the parents and referred the child to the General Hospital. Later on, the child somehow got admitted to Stella’s ward and when she got to know what had happened, she had commented about me to the others around her “see what this chap has done, after all that I have done for him”. When I got to know, I went straight up to her, apologised profusely, begged her forgiveness but showed her the MO I/C’s note asking me to send the child to the General Hospital. She then understood what had happened, instantly forgave me and calmly said “do not worry it is not your fault”. That was vintage Stella. She forgave and she forgot. She never held it against me. It is pertinent to place on record that she was not breaking any rules either. The child had leukaemia and Stella was one of the few people who took on the onerous task of treating leukaemia. So, the child simply had to be admitted to her unit for the anti-leukaemic drugs.

In the early nineties, Stella developed a stroke. When she had the initial features of a mild weakness in her hand, she disregarded it and went to see her patients. On her way back she went and saw Dr. Wickrama Wijenayake, the famous Physician, who promptly diagnosed it and got her to rest in bed. By evening it progressed. Almost pure motor weakness, with thankfully, complete preservation of the mind and speech

During her recovery, I used to go to her home and just sit there with her, simply chatting. I went virtually every morning. She just loved those visits. Stella made a complete recovery and went on for another twenty years after that.

She gave the very best of her time and dedication to the Sri Lanka Paediatric Association, which later became the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians. She was the President of this august institution in 1962/1963. What is not all that well chronicled are her efforts as an editor. She started her editorial duties with the *Ceylon Journal of Child Health*, Volume 4, in 1967, just 4 years after the inception of the journal. It was then an annual publication and she saw to it that it was published uninterrupted.

Together with yours truly, who was appointed as her Co-Editor in the year 2000, she successfully managed to change the title of the journal to that of *Sri Lanka*

Journal of Child Health and converted it from an annual to a quarterly publication. Working with her in the journal was quite an illuminating experience. She was indeed the best of them all. Her unending quest for quality in the publication was an abject lesson to all around, myself included.

Dr. Stella de Silva decided to give up the reins of managing the journal in 2003 and the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians was delighted to appoint her as its very first Editor Emeritus. From those very early times, when she really gave it her all, the journal has gained in stature. It is now the principal academic journal of child health in the country and is indexed in *Sciverse Scopus*. It is available in print and free text electronic formats. Stella’s work as an editor for 36 long years, a World Record by any stretch of imagination, was the cornerstone on which the progress of the journal was based. To the best of my knowledge, no other person in the world has had the distinction of guiding the destiny of a medical journal for such a long time. She taught us all, how exactly one must run an academic journal, and how one must unfailingly and tirelessly “aim for gold” in such a publication.

From a personal perspective, I have had the good fortune to have been her student, a junior colleague and a fellow Joint Editor. She was my mentor in every sense of the word. She played a major role, quite early in my career, in even teaching me the basics of proper scientific writing. Indeed, many are the fantastic lessons that I learnt at the feet of the master. It was Alfred Lord Tennyson who wrote in *Ulysses*, “*To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield*”. Stella taught me to do just that.

Her life seemed to revolve around medicine and this made many people think that medicine was the “be all and end all” for her. This was not true. The theatre was her favourite pastime. She loved drama, opera and art and was a regular attendee at the Lionel Wendt Performing Theatre. She was also a very competent seamstress, choosing often to design and stitch her own clothes. Not many people were also aware of her civic consciousness. She was a Founder Member of the Zonta Club of Colombo, an organisation dedicated to enhancing the status of women.

Among many other things, in 1983 she pioneered the Zonta Service Project to provide safe drinking water to thousands of settlers in the Mahaweli development area in Kalawewa. This was accomplished with a considerable amount of money from abroad. When that devastating tsunami struck in December 2004,

she rallied, yet again. She gathered a team of specialists and went to Galle, where her roots were, to help those who were affected. She was 85 years of age at that time.

Stella left this mortal world just the same way she lived, just ever so unpretentiously. She quietly faded off over just a few days and left us forever on the 12th of April 2012, at the age of 93. I have felt her demise as a tremendous loss, perhaps even more than anyone else.

One of the greatest regrets that I have in life is the fact that I never worked under her as one of her juniors in her ward. I had the chance to be her Intern House Officer in 1971 but the fool that I was, I opted to work in another unit. It was simply because I was not interested in paediatrics at that time. In fact I must confess that I hated it as a specialty. However, when you have been with them for some time, little children grow on you. In retrospect, it was also my coming into contact with people like Dr. Stella de Silva which finally convinced me that paediatrics was perhaps my own vocation.

Dr. Benjamin David, another doyen of paediatrics, once told me that I will be the next Stella. That was perhaps the equivalent of my trying to reach for the moon and the stars, an absolute impossibility. There has been..., there could ever have been..., and there will ever be, only one Stella. They have thrown away the mould in which she was made. She was a resplendent jewel with many a different facet to her personality and she dazzled in all her activities, just like a diamond that radiates the colours of the rainbow as light falls on it.

The fable that was Stella would live forever in the hearts and minds of all Sri Lankans. She was just a spectacular phenomenon. Her magnificent deeds, together with her unmatched academic brilliance, would be etched in gold for posterity in the annals of the history of paediatrics in Sri Lanka. Stella was a stellar luminous star..., hard to match and quite impossible to replace.

It was that great French scientist, Louis Pasteur, who ended one of his endearing statements with the sterling words "..... *and the future will belong to those who have done the most for suffering humanity.*" In that context, Stella's wonderful contribution to medicine in general and to paediatrics in particular, would undoubtedly reverberate throughout the corridors of time..., way into the future.

As for me, in these final moments of this oration, I hope very much that Madam Stella would be pleased to echo the sentiments expressed by Alfred Lord Tennyson in *Ulysses*

*"This is my son mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle.
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil"*

She did leave the sceptre of her journal with us and I have tried very hard not to let her down.

Dr. Stella de Silva was a devout Buddhist and according to the philosophy of the religion that she believed in, I have no doubt that the merit that had accrued from her selfless service to the children of Sri Lanka would assist in shortening her journey through *Samsāra*.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen..., I would finally seek your indulgence to take my leave, wrapped up in the fervent hope that I have managed to do justice to the profile of a glittering star..., most certainly a shining star like no other. Thank you, Madam Stella, for a wonderful life on earth. You will always remain in our hearts as a spectacular and priceless legend.

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