

IN REMEMBRANCE



Professor Ragunathar Kanagasuntheram

MBBS (Ceylon), PhD (Cambridge), FZS

(1919-2010)

Ragunathar Kanagasuntheram, Emeritus Professor of Anatomy at the National University of Singapore, passed away peacefully on 19th June 2010 at the age of 91 years in Adelaide, Australia. Born in Karainagar (Ceylon, now called Sri Lanka) on 14 October 1919, Professor Kana qualified with MBBS degrees from the prestigious University of Ceylon at Colombo, Ceylon in 1944. He was the only surviving son of five children of Mr and Mrs P Ragunathar. His father was a village teacher who was strict and righteous, in line with tradition and yet magnanimous. Professor Kanagasuntheram took his postgraduate surgery training, completing Part 1 of the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons, but decided (for health reasons) to forgo further training for Part 2 of the FRCS examinations to devote himself to the teaching of Anatomy.

First Asian head of Anatomy

He thus embarked on a long journey to pursue his PhD at the University of Cambridge, England. After obtaining his PhD degree in 1952 under the tutelage of the doyen of Anatomy in the United Kingdom, Professor James D Boyd, he lectured in both Ceylon and Sudan for a few years before he brought his experiences to the then University of Singapore as Head, Department of Anatomy and started basic Anatomy research by setting up the Histology Laboratory for both teaching and research (where he pioneered Neuroscience Research). Professor Kana (as he was affectionately known by many generations of students) was a respected and inspirational teacher and mentor at the Department of Anatomy to thousands of medical, dental, pharmacy and science students. He also had the honor of being the first Asian to occupy the Chair of Anatomy in 1962, almost 60 years after the establishment of the local medical school.

He built an Anatomy Animal House to stock animals [viz: mice, rats, tree shrews (tupai), slow lorises , hylobates gibbons and macaque monkeys] for long term research projects, with some of the best holding facilities and initiated the employment of a full-time animal caretaker. In the late 1960s, he deployed a senior laboratory technician to oversee the daily running of a brand new Electron Microscope Unit, which came directly under his charge. The main facility was the newly-purchased Hitachi HS-8 electron microscope, a coveted piece of research equipment which was the first such machine in South-East-Asia. It opened a new horizon in morphological research in the local medical school.

Over the years, Professor Kana published more than 70 research papers in renowned international refereed journals, with wide-ranging topics such as the nasopharynx, vomeronasal organ, spinal ganglia, duodenum and intrinsic muscles of the hand. Because of his intense research interest in the comparative anatomy of mammals (especially sub-human primates) and his substantial contributions to anatomical sciences, he had the distinction of being one of the few Asians elected as a Fellow of the Zoological Society (FZS) (United Kingdom).

Visionary, pioneering researcher and dedicated teacher

Professor Kana's visionary leadership also saw his pioneering efforts in the setting up of a fully-equipped Animal Operating Theatre for surgery on various animal species for research and surgical skills training. Anatomists, orthopedic surgeons and general surgeons were using this facility to hone their surgical skills as well as using animal models for their research. Emeritus Professor Robert WH Pho was one of the surgeons who successfully perfected his skills in microsurgery, thanks to this facility. The legacy of the present Department of Hand & Reconstructive Microsurgery at the National University Hospital (NUH) can be traced to its roots as the "Hand Surgery Unit", which began in the late 70s.

Professor Kana was an exemplary teacher. He was able to emphasize the important aspects of the topics he was covering and had the ability to explain difficult concepts regarding a specific structure, its relations and function(s) in a way that helped his students to understand and learn. He identified immediately with his students and they all loved him for his kind and tender approach in infusing them with knowledge, some of which could not be found in standard textbooks.

His co-authored book, “A New Approach to the Dissection of the Human Body” was a “holy grail”, the esteemed iconic guide-book that all students treasured. His other co-authored book entitled “Textbook of Anatomy: Regional, Functional, Clinical” has been successfully adopted by various medical schools worldwide.

Many medical students fondly remember his teaching of Gross Anatomy and Embryology. His breadth of knowledge, boundless enthusiasm, razor-sharp mind and friendly demeanour made students hang on to his every word. At the same time, Professor Kana’s humane and humble nature never failed to encourage and motivate students and colleagues alike. As a classroom lecturer and dissection hall teacher, he was peerless. His upright physique, sonorous voice, meticulous manner and formal dress (often with a tie) commanded attention and respect amongst students and peers.

Foundations laid for research-focused Department

The pragmatist that was Professor Kana believed in change. Over the years he kept to the over-riding aim of providing a solid foundation in basic medical sciences (esp. anatomical sciences) to address the evolving needs of today’s doctors. Creating a strong Department of Anatomy after assuming the Headship was an enormous undertaking and Professor Kana was able to achieve it all by recruiting dedicated staff members, many of them being medically qualified to undertake the teaching of future doctors. With so much enthusiasm for research and a genuine concern for the progress of his academic staff members, Prof Kana pioneered basic research in the department and inducted the training of PhDs under his immediate supervision within the department, counting Drs A Krishnamurti, MM Ahmed, S Vij, SK Loo and L Krishnamurti as his PhD graduates.

And a vibrant Anatomy museum

In the early 60s, Professor Kana was instrumental in the investment of time and effort to preserve prosected specimens. These were specially dissected by Mr Ayubi Berseh (a laboratory technician) and encased for display as a long-term learning resource for medical and dental students. Over time, better dissected specimens and an unique collection of normal and malformed embryos were added; all specimens were fully labeled for the benefit of interested learners. This collection of specimens finally evolved into what is now the “Anatomy Museum”, one of the best in Asia.

Professor Kana retired from the Headship of the Anatomy Department in 1979, when he attained the age of 60 years. He continued to serve the department upon retirement for another year before leaving for good to take up the Headship of the Anatomy Department at Jaffna Medical College, Sri Lanka. He later became the Dean of the same College.

Professor R Kanagasuntheram was conferred the Emeritus Professorship by the National University of Singapore in 1981, the first of its kind at NUS. Steadfast in the way he loved and lived his life, Professor Kana leaves behind his beloved wife Sornam, 2 sons (Narendran and Rajendran – both doctors) and 3 daughters (Pathmini, Bhavani and Panja) and many grandchildren to mourn his passing - and celebrate a benevolent and munificent life that had affectionately changed or made a difference to the lives of many who had chanced upon him.

As a mark of respect for this doyen of Anatomy and in acknowledgement of his outstanding achievements and contributions, the Department of Anatomy will be hosting an event, “In Celebration of the Life of Professor R Kanagasuntheram” on 24 July 2010 at 3.00pm sharp at the Auditorium, NUHS Tower Block (next to the National University Hospital).

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