

PAUL HARRISON AWARD 2005

In 1967, yet another batch of girls and boys joined CMC Vellore. They were like most other batches-some more focused on the task ahead than others, but none that would leave unchanged by the experience of walking in Dr. Ida Scudder's footsteps.

Among them was Nandakumar Menon, a shy boy from Kerala. Having won the Government of India National Science Talent Scholarship, he came to CMC with excellent credentials. Over the years, he proved to be quite a scholar. Throughout his career in CMC, he was a brilliant student and won the Certificate of Merit in Biochemistry, Microbiology, Social & Preventive Medicine and Internal Medicine. He was awarded the Professor Gault Prize in Pathology for the best investigative paper entitled "Immunology of Leprosy". More importantly, he was always known to be open and honest, an idealist with a great concern for the less privileged.

After completing his internship in CMC Vellore, he worked at the Christian Fellowship Hospital, Oddanchatram from 1974-1975 before moving to the US for higher education. He did the Surgical Residency from 1976-80, during which period, he excelled at his work. He was Attending Surgeon from 1980-86 and Clinical Instructor and Clinical Assistant Professor of Surgery from 1985-86.

Just about the time when most would choose to be in their comfort zones; Nandakumar and his wife Shyla felt the call from home. Leaving behind a successful surgery practice in the US, Nand uprooted his family and came to Trivandrum. Following the axiom-"thrive where you are planted"-Nand and Shyla resumed successful careers as a surgeon and an ob/gyn specialist respectively. But even this was not where Nand felt his calling. What follows is the stuff of folklore.

Nand had heard that there was a need for a surgeon and ob/gyn specialist in a hospital in Gudalur, in the Niligiri Hills. Deva and Roopa, also from CMC, had already laid some groundwork there. Following his heart-Nand arrived unannounced in Gudalur, after a dusty bus ride, with a jholi on his shoulder and chappals-the quintessential village doctor. Shyla and his family followed in short order, to settle there.

To understand the enormity of the journey that Nand has taken over the last 17 years, one has to visualize the beginning. The Adivasi(the aborigines of India) are the most neglected population of India. Gudalur Valley, situated at the tri-junction of Tamilnadu, Kerala and Karnataka, is home for over 25,000 Adivasis. Over generations they had been badly abused and had successively been cheated out of large tracts of land. They live scattered in the rugged terrains of the hills, with no sense of self, no means to earn a living, no access to healthcare and no education. They mistrusted everyone and accepted death as inevitable. Infant and Maternal Mortality were sky high, immunizations were unheard of and malnutrition was rampant. This was the scene that Nand walked into.

In very short order, Nand realized that to affect a change in these peoples lives, there had to be more than an acute care medical facility; There had to be a groundswell of change. Nand set about to change a whole society. This required both funds and manpower and Nand used all the resources available to him to get both. Along with groups such as ACCORD, Nand and Shyla orchestrated the sea change. Money and manpower started trickling in.

Understanding the psychology of the Adivasi, they soon realized that they needed Adivasis to work in the hospital. This gave birth to the nursing training program for Adivasi girls. In an effort to gain their trust, young Adivasis were chosen and trained as Health Animators to go and scout the villages for patients and help bring them in to the hospital.

In 1990 ASHWINI (Assn for Health Welfare in the Nilgiris) was born. One of the highlights of this program is its innovative health insurance program, at a time when health insurance was a rarity in mainstream society in India. It has become a model for others to follow.

“Give a man a fish and feed him for a day, teach him to fish and feed him for a life time”-Nand realized this truth and became involved in the economics of the society. Along with Accord busily obtaining and protecting land deeds, the Adivasis started growing tea and coffee. They organized themselves politically and fought against social injustice and are able to join mainstream society now with their heads held high.

Educating the young was the next priority. A school was built on Nand’s private property. A school bus was obtained that roams the hills to collect and drop off the students, who still walk a few miles to the bus.

The 20 bed hospital is in itself a marvel. What it lacks in physical facilities, it more than makes up in medical care which is top tier. Stories abound of lives saved by the medical system working as a whole. Physician volunteers from across the nation and the world go to work there. The latest addition is the Medical Student Elective where students from across the globe can come for the experience. So far has the fame of this hospital spread by word of mouth that Non Adivasi patients are clamoring to be admitted there. This opens up a whole new possibility of a second hospital that will help defray costs of the first.

What has the Gudalur Adivasi Hospital achieved in the last 17 years? Eclampsia and Tetanus are now unheard of; Maternal Mortality is almost non-existent; Infant mortality has declined sharply, death from diarrhoea is a rarity. The greatest achievement of all is the change in the mindset of the Adivasi people who have learnt to trust and come for medical care of their own volition, well in time to be cured.

Nandakumar clearly lives the lines in the College Song “***Not for fame not for wealth, our endeavour***”. *He has not chosen wealth or recognition while toiling with his wife in the Nilgiri hills. He has chosen to work in the fringes of society with a long forgotten people keeping in mind his alma mater’s motto “***Not to be ministered unto but to minister***”.*

In recognition of his outstanding contribution, the Christian Medical College, Vellore, is proud to bestow the Paul Harrison Award 2005 upon one of its illustrious alumni.