

Dr. Thomas Cherian; Father of Cancer Surgery in Kerala

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Abstract Dr. Thomas Cherian (1940–2014) is one of the first surgical oncologists from State of Kerala, India. A humble human being, dexterous surgeon, untiring worker, and a dynamic personality that was Dr. Thomas Cherian. His vision, hardworking abilities and indomitable spirit were exemplary. He has paved path for the development of surgical oncology in Kerala. This article portrays not only the life of a selfless man, but also the beginning of a new speciality of Surgical Oncology in Kerala.

Keywords Thomas Cherian · Kerala · Cancer surgery · Surgical oncologist

One fine winter evening of 1983, time half past seven; as usual the small city of Trivandrum is going for an early sleep. In a makeshift operating room in the Cancer Wing of Trivandrum Medical College, the surgical team is busy doing a difficult salvage operation on a patient who had recurrent cancer after radiation therapy. The surgeon is a short man with beard, who is none other than Dr. Thomas Cherian, the first surgical oncologist of Kerala. Just 2 years after Stephan Ariyan performed the first pectoralis major myocutaneous flap in Yale University hospital in US, without having access to the publication of Ariyan [1], Dr. Thomas Cherian used the same technique to reconstruct head and neck defects after complex cancer resections. In those olden days, when the concept of modern operating rooms and surgical instruments were at its infancy, he used to do complex cancer surgeries using instruments improvised by him with locally available materials. His junior colleagues at that time, used to remember him running

to his scooter mechanic to get some help to make some metallic instruments he has designed for surgery.

Born on 1st September 1940 in Alleppey district of Kerala, Dr. Thomas Cherian was the fourth of the seven siblings. When he was 8 years of age when he was diagnosed with Pott's spine. His abnormal gait was initially attributed to a fall he had, but when his symptoms worsened he was taken to several doctors and finally to Madras; but the doctors there, could not help him much. On their return railway journey back from Madras, on the advice of fellow travellers, his parents took him for a second opinion to Christian Medical College, Vellore.

He always felt that the halt there was the turning point in his life. The buckle braces put in Madras were removed and he was placed in a plaster cast chest down to his hip, and was advised complete rest on a hard wooden bed. His initial stay in Vellore was for a couple of weeks followed by six monthly visits for review and changing of cast. This lasted for two long years during which time, much to his disappointment he had to miss school. During those days, books were his constant companions and he spent a lot of time solving mathematical problems. Dr. Paul Brand¹[2], his physician, was amazed by the boy who was passionate about reading at an early age. Though not his treating doctors, Dr. Ida Scudder² and Dr. Sommervell³ [3] used to visit the ward and share a few moments with patients including him and supplied him with

¹ Dr. Paul Brand (July 17, 1914–July 8, 2003) Dr. Paul Brand was surgeon from Christian Medical College & Hospital in Vellore, India, who was famous for his work on surgical correction for deformities occurred after leprosy.

² Dr. Ida Scudder (December 9, 1870–May 23, 1960) was an American physician who was also a missionary and she was the founder of Christian Medical College & Hospital, Vellore, which is one of the earliest teaching hospitals in Asia.

³ Dr. Theodore Howard Somervell (16 April 1890–23 January 1975) was a British surgeon who dedicated his service to people of south india. He was pioneer in establishing modern medical treatment for cure of leprosy, which was thought incurable at that time.

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more books to read. He was taken in by their compassion, the empathy, care and concern shown to him and fellow patients and this made the pain, he was going through, worth it. Following this, it took months of massages and exercises for his 'weak neck' to recover enough, for him to return to mainstream schooling. Deep down in his heart, a desire to be able to touch others in a way he had been touched, was born.

Many years later when Dr. Paul Brand visited Trivandrum, to give an oration, Dr. Cherian waited eagerly for him to finish his talk. With childlike enthusiasm, he told him how he had inspired him to take up plastic surgery. Though Dr. Brand did not recollect the little boy, whose life he had touched, he was truly happy to have met him.

After his intermediate, filled with joy that his dreams of becoming a doctor were coming true and fully encouraged and backed by his father, he went to Kasturba Medical College (KMC), Manipal to pursue his medical education. He was always full of interesting stories about his friends and classmates and the memorable times he had spent with them at Manipal. He graduated in the year 1965 and returned to his native town where he got an opportunity to be a part of the government medical services.

After having served at a few departments at Allepey and Kottayam Medical Colleges he took leave and went to Kurnool (Andhra Pradesh) to pursue his post graduate training in general surgery, much to the disappointment of his family, who were keen on him doing MD (Medicine). Dr. Cherian completed his MS (General Surgery) course and returned to Trivandrum to rejoin Government Medical College service and was posted in the Department of Anaesthesia. Working in Anaesthesia taught and equipped him for what God had planned for him in his life. He often used to say that he learned more surgery "being on the other side".

He went on to train in MCh (Master of Chirurgical) Plastic Surgery in 1978. As part of his training he spent a lot of his time in the Burns Unit. This was where he developed a passion for dressing patient's wounds; taking hours on end to meticulously clean each patient's wound and dress them. He continued this passion for taking care of patient's wounds throughout his career and his life. He believed that every dying patient, especially cancer patients with infected wounds deserved a dignified death. He would reminisce fondly about opportunities given by God and helpful teachers like Dr. Sukumaran (Ear-Nose-Throat Surgery) and Dr. Mani Ninan (Paediatric Surgery), who called him often to assist them in their reconstructive surgeries.

A vacancy opened up in Regional Cancer Centre (RCC), Trivandrum for the post of surgical oncologist soon after his plastic surgery training. Never one to walk away from a challenge, he applied immediately, knowing full well that he would have to start from scratch. He was given a small room with an attached washroom in the corner of the old Medical College building, where the department of surgical oncology

and its operating room of RCC Trivandrum commenced its humble beginning. He spent the initial days getting it in order. One could see the windows of his small operation theatre wide open as he believed natural sunlight was the best disinfectant. His beloved assistants remember their boss clearing out stuff, organizing Oxygen cylinders, even mopping and sweeping the place when the need arose. Equipped with a dogged determination and an indomitable spirit, he started doing surgeries. Throughout those initial years at RCC he never complained and only saw the positives in all the challenges life threw at him.

In the year 1986, he was sent on a British Council Fellowship to the United Kingdom. He had the opportunity to visit some of the best cancer centres of that time and interact with leading surgical oncologists, onco-plastic surgeons and other oncologists. He enjoyed the brief trip visiting interesting places, interacting with people and exchanging ideas. A proud Indian at heart, he used to narrate how he went to church regularly on Sunday evenings wearing Mundu and Jubba, even in peak winter.

Making the most difficult decision of his life, he left RCC in 1992, to join his alma mater KMC, Manipal and started the department of surgical oncology at Shridi Sai Baba Cancer Centre, KMC, Manipal. By this time he was fully confident of abilities of juniors in RCC who was trained by him, including Dr. Iqbal Ahamed (present Head of the Department of Surgical Oncology) of and Dr. Paul Sebastian (present Director of RCC) to take the department to the new heights. At KMC With the full support and cooperation from other departments, he was able to improvise and take up bigger surgical challenges. He never forgot the help and support of the Department of Anaesthesia, headed by (Late) Dr. Phanindranath Thota who literally cheered him on and together worked into the wee hours of the night, to ensure each patient got the best.

When head and neck cancer surgeries and reconstruction used to be done with lot of pomp and vigour in the prestigious ENT and Head and Neck Department at KMC, Prof Cherian used to perform more complicated ones in the newly formed surgical oncology department with limited facilities with just the help of the nurses. His juniors always found him spending time in wards, irrespective of the time of day, caring, supporting patients and consoling the relatives. Dr Jacob Kurian who was his junior used to share his experiences and thoughts about this great man who has abilities given by God to humbly work, in any down to earth place, where he is called to serve and with his toiling effort to bring in glory and honour to the place.

After retiring from KMC, Manipal in the year 2000 he spent a few years at Soumya Apollo Hospital, Vijayawada. Supporting the hospital as it faced a crisis as most doctors left, he stayed on placing his patients above all else.

When it was time to leave Vijayawada, he made up his mind to help an enthusiastic group of nuns who wanted to

establish a cancer centre in the small town of Chertala in Alappuzha district of Kerala. He continued his crusade against cancer at this hospital till the day he passed away. Even in his seventies he was so enthusiastic about newer surgeries and reconstructive techniques. Surgeons of RCC, Trivandrum still cherish the memories of him visiting RCC to watch submental flap reconstruction after an oral cancer resection in 2010. He was a visionary surgeon who thought about conservative and function preserving surgeries in oncology like breast conservation surgeries and functional neck dissections much before it became popular.

His approach to surgery was also different. For any new procedure he never believed in reading large surgical volumes, but always read the anatomy. He passionately believed that one could devise one's own approach to every situation, if one was well versed in the anatomy of that region. He loved to think out of the box and his conviction about what was right was unwavering.

He had a unique understanding of the disease and its mutilating nature. Looking at his patients one could appreciate the fine blend of ablative and reconstructive oncosurgery. To make sure every head and neck cancer patient was disease free and had a presentable appearance, he worked late into the night. He would make sure to discuss each of his patient's findings with the pathologist, in great detail. He knew his limitations and always appreciated others in his team.

A simple man of few words, he always maintained a low profile, loved his fellow men, believed in the Lord Almighty

and let his work do all the talking. So passionate was he about his patients and his work that his beloved wife knew his patients names, their problems and what he was planning for each one of them.

His legacy is carried forward by his children, his assistants and the many surgeons he trained. Most of those who knew him and worked with him agree that "Sir" not only taught them to be good, thinking doctors but also good human beings.

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