

COMMENTARIES AND NOTES

Dr. Maya Gunasekera (1961-2006)

Dr. Maya Bharathi Gunasekera (nee Ranawaka) who was the Founder and Chief Executive of Genetech



M o l e c u l a r Diagnostic and School of Gene Technology, passed away on 7 April 2006. It was an untimely death and an irreparable loss to her family, the scientific community in Sri Lanka and the country.

She had her primary and secondary

education at Visakha Vidyalaya, Colombo and obtained her B.Sc. degree with first class honours from the University of Colombo. She then joined the Malaria Research Unit of the Department of Parasitology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo as a Research Assistant and worked for about an year. She was then awarded a Commonwealth scholarship and obtained a Ph.D. in Molecular Parasitology from the National Institute for Medical Research in Mill Hill, London. On her return to Sri Lanka, she joined the Department of Chemistry at the University of Colombo. Dr. Gunasekera pioneered the use of DNA testing in forensic casework in Sri Lanka, and was involved in almost all DNA typing tests done in Sri Lanka until the time of her death. Research teams led by Dr. Gunasekera developed the first DNA probe for the malaria vector, *Anopheles culicifacies*, a new molecular test for the early diagnosis of dengue, pioneering genetic work on the Sri Lankan elephant and the resolving of the taxonomic status of a fruit bat species complex. In 1999, Dr. Gunasekera gave expert evidence on DNA typing for the Hokandara murder trial making history as the first court case to accept DNA evidence in Sri Lanka.

Dr. Gunasekera was not only a dedicated researcher but also an excellent teacher. As a senior lecturer in the Department of Chemistry, she co-coordinated the development of the syllabus for the first B.Sc. Special degree programme in Molecular Biology and Biochemistry offered at a university of Sri Lanka. Having served the University of Colombo she then established 'GENETECH', the first Biotech Company in Sri Lanka which functions mainly as a service rather than a business. She continued to teach people from various walks of life and delivered numerous lectures to police officers, lawyers, doctors and even school children. In taking the DNA technology to the people of this country and teaching the necessary groups the application of this technology Dr. Gunasekera worked tirelessly. Even when she was not in the best of health she continued to do her duty towards society with immense courage and dedication.

At 44 years of age, still considerably young as a scientist she had been involved in many national and international ventures. She served as a consultant for several committees of the Government Ministries, including the National Task force for Dengue prevention and control. At the National Science Foundation, Colombo she served as the Chairperson of the Working Committee on Biotechnology. She also served as the Governor for International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) representing Sri Lanka and as the Coordinator for the drafting of National Policy and Guidelines for the safe use of Recombinant DNA Technology in Sri Lanka.

In the short period of her life as a unique scientist she received many awards in appreciation of her work both by local and international bodies. The International Foundation for Science in Sweden awarded their Jubilee Award to Dr. Gunasekera in 2003 in recognition of her work. The Third World Academy of Sciences, Italy and the NSF, Colombo together awarded her the Young Scientist Award in Biology in 2002. Dr. Gunasekera received one of the David Fussy Alumni scholarships, granted to only three persons per year from all the Commonwealth countries. The award for excellence in

research by the University of Colombo, NSF - Sri Lanka Merit Award for Biotechnology, British Council Asser Award and President's Research Bonus Award were also among the long list of her achievements.

Dr. Gunasekera was a wonderful human being, a concerned and dedicated teacher, mentor and friend. She leaves behind three lovely children and husband who supported her in all her efforts.

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