



KUSUMA KUMARY

INDIA

As one of the early paediatric oncologists in the state of Kerala, India, Dr. Kusuma Kumary was instrumental in establishing the Paediatric Oncology Department at the Regional Cancer Centre (RCC), Trivandrum, making advanced cancer treatment accessible to underprivileged children across the region. She earned her medical degree (1976) and paediatrics post-graduation (1984) from the University of Kerala and had fellowships in paediatric oncology from the UK, USA, and Italy. Joining RCC in 1984, she developed the fledgling Paediatric unit into a leading 43-bed establishment with all modern facilities.

Throughout her 33-year career beginning as Lecturer in Paediatric oncology and culminating as Professor and Head of Paediatric Oncology and later the Additional Director, RCC, she has championed affordable cancer care, worked to start the D.M. course in Paediatric Oncology in her Centre, founded the "PRATYASHA", a support group comprising of cancer survivors and their parents, established a "Home Away from Home" for the Patients' families undergoing treatment and established a Reintegration project aimed at rehabilitation of these families into the society. Her efforts have been recognized with numerous awards, including the RV Lokeshwar Memorial PHO Oration, Indian Medical Association's Best Doctor Award and the Government of Kerala Special Award in Modern Medicine. With over 125 publications and a significant role in education and training of young professionals, her work emphasizes comprehensive patient care, including palliative and psycho-social support, indicative of her serious involvement in paediatric oncology practice in the state.

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On Relationships that Influenced My Career

I have been privileged to be acquainted with and work alongside many stalwarts in the field of oncology, many of whom have influenced my career and practice. Dr. M. Krishnan Nair and Dr. Padmanabhan of the RCC Trivandrum, and Dr. Hanumantha Rao, Dr. Dorothy Pearson and Dr. Morris Jones, Christie Hospital, Manchester are a few to name.

Dr. Krishnan Nair inspired me with the vision and necessity of a unique paediatric cancer care facility early in my career and encouraged me to take up the responsibility. He provided unconditional support in all my endeavors and gave me full freedom to work towards developing a system. He encouraged me to attend all important meetings and introduced me to prominent persons working in the field. He also arranged for my training nationally and internationally and facilitated collaboration with the Government authorities for the necessary sanctions and permissions while developing the department. He entrusted me with designing the full-fledged paediatric oncology ward in the new building of the RCC. When I was at the verge of burnout, Dr. Krishnan Nair inspired me by giving the advice - you cannot have sympathy to the point of self-extinction. He was a supportive mentor who advised me to take care of my personal life also amid my hectic and demanding professional career.

Dr. Hanumantha Rao Gattamineni was my mentor while I underwent training at the Christie Hospital and recommended me for the SIOP travel scholarship the first time it was introduced. He nominated me for obtaining the UK CCSG membership and arranged for observation training in Manchester for the second time. He took special interest in updating me about the management of solid tumors, and helped to access international papers and publications which were not easily available in the early years. He kindled my interest in research and guided me in writing articles for the scientific journals.

On Challenges and Overcoming Them

When I began my career, the concept of paediatric oncology was totally new in our state, and the idea of establishing a pediatric oncology facility was itself a huge challenge.

In my early days, RCC was functioning as part of the Government Medical College Hospital, Trivandrum, and paediatric patients were admitted under the Radiotherapy unit with no separate ward or support staff. With consistent effort and negotiations with the authorities and the then Radiotherapy Chiefs, I was able to procure 12 beds for paediatric cancer patients. Later, the Department of Nuclear Medicine in the Medical College shifted to a new OP and I was able to convince the hospital administration to allocate 3 rooms from the Nuclear Medicine OP for the paediatric oncology patients. When the new building for RCC was constructed, I could configure a full-fledged 43 bedded ward with enough rooms and space for the paediatric oncology department.

Both human and material resources were in shortage during the early days. The major challenges were non-availability of many anti-cancer drugs, discontinuous supply of locally available medicines, and non-existent purchase policy for anti-cancer drugs. After repeated efforts, I was able to convince the administration to formulate a purchase policy for the RCC and used personal contacts and influence to procure the locally unavailable chemotherapy medications and antibiotics from outside. To overcome manpower shortage, I associated with other clinical Departments to post staff and assistants on temporary basis and made use of trainees from paediatrics and radiotherapy departments to carry out patient care duties. I also put in constant requests to the Government to create permanent positions in paediatric oncology, as a result of which the staff strength of the Department increased over time.

The lessons learned from my experience are that

constant effort, integrity, positive attitude and the correct mindset are the keys to overcome the challenges in our path and achieve our goals, and it has made me stronger as a person, leader and administrator.

On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

I am extremely grateful to my family for their support, understanding and encouragement throughout my career. The first day, I returned home in tears after seeing the plight of these unfortunate suffering children and my husband motivated me by saying: if you do not take care of them, who else will? From then on, he has stood alongside me as a pillar of strength and has supported me by sharing family responsibilities, including taking care of our child, while balancing our work and life. Hence, I was able to spend more time and energy towards my profession. My son, who was very young at the start of my professional life, demonstrated exemplary understanding and maturity beyond his age by not demanding my time, motherly care and attention, and instead preferring me to go to the hospital and be a “mother to sick children.” My family believed in me and held me together when I was facing stress and emotional burnout and was always there for me during the ups and downs of my career. Their unflinching support, sacrifice and positivity has been pivotal in making me the person I am today.

My Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation of Female Leaders

Every life matters. Set a goal, work for it and regularly review the progress. Accept setbacks. Stay true to yourself. Sometimes risks must be taken for progress. Continuous learning is required, and work-life balance is important.

My advice for the young paediatric oncologists embarking on a career is that entering a career in paediatric oncology is a profound journey filled with

challenges and rewards. Stay updated in the field and find out mentors who can guide you in your career. You must be honest, have compassion towards your patients and their families. Develop good communication skills and resilience. Pediatric oncology is emotionally taxing. Self-care and work-life balance is vital. The journey is difficult, but you can make a meaningful difference in the lives your patients and their families.

Never bother about how much you know, the important thing is what you can do with what you know. As you look back on your life, you will find that the moments that stand out are “the moments when you have done something for others”.