

## Homage to Dr KV Desikan (1927 - 2022)



Dr K.V. Desikan, a well-known and an highly respected leprologist, passed away on 23rd October, 2022. He was nearly ninety-six. Dr Desikan joined Mysore Medical College in 1944 and completed his MBBS in 1949. From the beginning he had decided to work in leprosy. Inspired by Dr Sushila Nayar, Dr Desikan joined Dr. Wardekar in Gandhi Memorial Leprosy Foundation (GMLF) in 1952. He began to treat patients from neighbouring villages with Dapsone, a recently introduced drug. This was the world's very first Survey, Education and Treatment (SET) programme for diagnosis and management of leprosy. The Government of India eventually started the National Leprosy Control Programme (NLCP) in 1955 and the SET method became the standard procedure for leprosy control in the entire country. Later, the program was endorsed by the WHO, and was implemented worldwide. GMLF had established a Leprosy Control Unit at Chilakalapalle, a semi tribal village in Shrikakulam

(presently Vijayanagaram) District, in the Northern part of Andhra Pradesh. Dr Desikan was posted at this unit till 1962 and served the rural people with deep compassion as a doctor.

Dr Desikan completed his post graduate degree in Pathology in 1966 from Christian Medical College in Vellore. His MD thesis involved autopsy studies in leprosy patients. He carried out the largest series of autopsy studies on leprosy patients and this is a highly cited work. In 1967, he was selected for the position of a Senior Research officer at the Govt of India's Central Leprosy Teaching and Research Centre at Chingleput (now Chengalapattu). In his subsequent research journey continuing up to Agra he pioneered studies on mouse footpad experiments to further understand the pathogenesis of the disease. He expanded his research into understanding the viability of leprosy bacillus outside human body. These publications continue to be relevant even today.

When we joined JALMA in January 1979 it was just three years old under ICMR's administration. JALMA was transferred to Indian administration in 1976 and Dr Desikan was appointed as its first regular director. Of course, JALMA had done extremely well under its 10-12 years under Japanese Administration. As India Centre of Japanese Leprosy Mission for Asia (JALMA) it had a name and respect in science and inspired confidence among people. It was already mentioned in textbooks of Social and Preventive Medicine and its references were given in many other documents. Clinical units were well set from Japanese time, a number of bright physicians and surgeon had joined ICMR-JALMA (now renamed as Central JALMA Institute for Leprosy) and were trying to pursue their dreams in clinical leprosy. Electron Microscopy laboratory was already established during Japanese period. Immunology and Biochemistry had started growing. Dr Desikan himself was contributing to the development of Experimental Leprosy and Pathology, by then well qualified scientists had joined these laboratories by then. I had some ideas, but it was ground zero for microbiological research – no laboratory, no infrastructure. That is where my nurturing by Dr Desikan began. Rest is history. He served the institute for a long time from 1976 to 1987 and made significant contributions to its expansion and growth as an Indian institution of eminence.

Dr Desikan superannuated from JALMA in 1987 and came back to Sewagram, Wardha, where, with the help of LEPR, the British Leprosy Relief Association, he set up a leprosy histopathology laboratory in MGIMS, Sewagram. He was founder member of Lepra Society and served as its first Chairman, a post he continued until he stepped down in 2003. Till he was well into his eighties, he continued providing voluntary services to

treat patients at the St. Joseph's leprosy centre in Sanawad, in Madhya Pradesh.

Over the years, Dr Desikan received several honours. To name some, he received the ICMR/JALMA Oration Award, the KC Sahu Gold Medal, the Gold Medal of the Argentina Leprosy Foundation, the Certificate of Honour, Medical Research Institute, Florida Institute of Technology.

Two weeks before his death, I wrote a piece, "Beginning of My Journey in Leprosy Research: Memories of Working with Dr KV Desikan" for biography of Dr Desikan beautifully compiled by his daughter Dr Prabha Desikan. This biography titled, "K.V.Desikan: An Extraordinary Life" was released at International Leprosy Congress Hyderabad during early November 2022, a few days after departure of this remarkable multi-faceted individual. He and his wife Kamala Desikan, popularly known as "Mataji" touched the lives of a large number of diverse people. His daughter has grown to be an established reputed professional and administrator and ably continues to carry the legacy.

In my write up for his biography I had concluded, "Dr Desikan continues to do well in his 90s. May God bless him with many happy and healthy years ahead". He left us two weeks later! That is fragility of our existence. However, how we travel this journey matters. Dr Desikan continued to be active till end of his life. In a career spanning more than sixty years, his work encompassed the entire spectrum of leprosy: descriptive epidemiology, diagnostics, histology, immunology, physiology, therapy and simple clinical observations. He played the roles of doctor, scientist and administrator. He left imprint everywhere. To sum up - He lived a life "truly lived".

Tributes from all of us leprologists to Dr KV Desikan, an extraordinary person who has left a lasting impact on evolution of leprology!