

CONFERMENT OF AN HONORARY DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF SCIENCE

PROFESSOR DIYANATH SAMARASINGHE

Presented by: Dean, Faculty of Applied Sciences

Chancellor Sir,

I am honoured and privileged to present to you Prof. Diyanath Samarasinghe, well-known scholar, researcher and educator for the conferment of an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science, at this 17th General Convocation of the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka.

Dr. Samarasinghe received his primary and secondary education from Royal College, Colombo. At Royal College, his achievements included winning the Dornhorst Prize for all-round merit and appointment as the Head Prefect of the school. Among the many other prizes, he won, were the Denham Prize for Mathematics and the prestigious Turnour Scholarship. He opted to pursue Advanced Level studies in Biology, despite having excelled in mathematics.

Dr. Samarasinghe is a graduate of the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo. Soon after graduating he joined its staff as a Lecturer, in 1976. His postgraduate training in Psychiatry was at the General Hospital of Colombo and the Institute of Psychiatry and Maudsley Hospital, London – a most sought after training institution in the UK.

While pursuing his studies in the UK, he obtained

the Membership of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (MRCPsy., UK), and

the Diploma in Psychological Medicine (DPM, UK).

He succeeded at the conjoint examination of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons, leading to the qualifications

LRCP, UK (Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians)

and MRCS, England (Member of the Royal College of Surgeons).

He was made a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (FRCPSy, UK) in 1999.

He has also been elected a Fellow of the Sri Lanka College of Physicians and a Fellow of the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists.

He served as a Senior Registrar at the Maudsley Hospital, London and had his first experience working as a consultant psychiatrist, at the age of 33, in Bermuda.

He resumed service as a Senior Lecturer at the Colombo University in 1983, and served concurrently as a psychiatrist at the University Psychiatry Unit at the General Hospital Colombo, later called the National Hospital of Sri Lanka, until his retirement in 2015.

As a teacher at the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo, Prof. Samarasinghe's foremost efforts were directed at training undergraduates in accurate and efficient clinical decision making.

At the same time, he worked energetically to generate among them a respect for ethics and a commitment to protecting patients from various forms of exploitation. And in post-graduate training, his efforts included building capacity among psychiatrists to deliver not only physical treatments but also psychological treatments at the highest technical standards. Prof. Samarasinghe served, in addition to his clinical teaching and service responsibilities, as the first convenor of the Community Stream Committee when the Colombo Medical Faculty reorganized its curriculum. He worked actively to encourage students to understand how to help communities take control of and improve their wellbeing.

His clinical teaching and practice always included integration of the community and wider social perspective in patient management.

His initial research interest was in the management and prevention of alcohol and other substance use problems. The major publications listed in his CV number over 60, with a larger number of shorter papers and brief communications. The research publications include research monographs and papers in major international journals. He also has published invited editorials in the Ceylon Medical Journal, British Journal of Addiction and the British Medical Journal. There are several chapters in edited scientific monographs to his credit and he has been a member of committees drafting several WHO Expert Committee Reports on Alcohol and Substance Use.

Dr. Samarasinghe has also been commissioned by the World Health Organization (WHO) Geneva, WHO (South East Asia) and FORUT (Norway) to author books and training manuals on aspects of alcohol and tobacco treatment and prevention. He has authored and co-authored books and manuals for the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka, UNICEF Sri Lanka, on Health Promotion and on Child and Adolescent Development.

He has, in addition, published a series of popular books of general interest with the community based mental health organization, 'Nest'.

He has been a Member of the International Advisory Board of "*Addiction Abstracts*", UK and a Member, of the Editorial Advisory Board of the British Journal, "*Addiction*", from the 1990s.

Dr. Samarasinghe's various appointments with agencies outside the University are numerous.

He has been a Member of the WHO Expert Advisory Panel on Drug Dependence and Alcohol Problems since 1992 and was a Member of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Tobacco Product Regulation (SACTOB) of WHO, Geneva from 2000 to 2004.

He served as an International Consultant on several occasions to countries including: Vietnam, India, Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – to contribute to formulating national policies, and evaluating and assessing alcohol and drug prevention programmes and HIV prevention projects.

In Sri Lanka Dr. Samarasinghe has served as:

Chairman of the National Dangerous Drugs Control Board, from 1995 to 2001.

A Member of Governing Council, Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA) from 2007 to 2009,

Chairman - Committee on Tobacco, Alcohol and Illicit Drugs of the Sri Lanka Medical Association from 1995 to 1999,

Council member, National Youth services Council from 2000 to 2001 and

Member, Academic Affairs Board of the National Institute of Education from 1988 to 1993.

Whilst serving in these many capacities, there are some special contributions that Dr. Samarasinghe has made.

During the armed conflicts unleashed by the LTTE and the JVP, he responded to an appeal by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF to train field-level health staff and volunteers to assist the numerous child, adolescent and adult victims exposed to extreme psychological trauma, for whom no form of expert psychological help was possible in their areas.

He travelled to any distant and difficult area, where the needs were greatest, and organized therapeutic interventions for victims on different sides of the respective conflicts. There was no part of the country – however difficult or risky to visit – to which he refused to travel, to train whoever could deliver the desperately needed interventions.

At a time when professionals helping victims of one or other party to the conflict were considered an enemy, Dr. Samarasinghe was quite willing to stand up to various threats and pressures and provide whatever help was needed to whoever was in need. He provided a theoretical model for intervention, based on a few basic principles that lay persons could easily use, to train field staff and volunteers. This was eventually published in the form of training manuals that he co-authored for UNICEF, to build capacity among grassroot workers. These Sinhala, Tamil and English manuals were widely used at the time.

Dr Samarasinghe played a major role in drafting and implementing the National Policy on Suicide Prevention as a key player in the Presidential Task Force on Suicide Prevention, from 1996. The task force's recommendations, based on the

available scientific evidence, were actively implemented by the task force, in which he was a most active member. We are aware that our suicide rates have declined significantly since the task force's recommendations were implemented.

A recommendation in that policy included reference to an unique approach – namely, that of changing the ‘culture’ within communities towards discouraging suicide. The approach had previously been piloted successfully in Rajarata, when Dr Samarasinghe was requested by the health authorities in the North Central Province for assistance in dealing with the exceedingly high suicides rates at the time.

As Chairman of the National Dangerous Drugs Control Board Dr Samarasinghe initiated some novel approaches. Among these was an initiative to keep the rates of drug injecting low, as a means of preventing the transmission of HIV. This innovation was to minimize ‘normalization’ and popularization of drug injecting and to work with drug using groups through outreach activities, to make injecting ‘unfashionable’.

He also served as Chairman of the Presidential Task force on Alcohol and Tobacco, which drafted a combined policy approach to these two substances – a strategy adopted first in Sri Lanka. This policy, which was subsequently shelved by the then government, was the basis of the more recently enacted legislation, the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol Act.

He played the leading role in generating the funds needed to enable ADIC (Alcohol and Drug Information Centre, Colombo) to launch, in the 1990s, its widely disseminated alcohol and tobacco prevention programme. The vigorous programme he initiated and implemented then included many novel and highly effective approaches to prevention work.

He gave up a lucrative private medical practice at the time that he took up the challenge of directing the initiation and development of ADIC's national programme. A new and testable model for preventing alcohol problems emerged as a result. The basis is to enable groups and communities to question the many

unscientific assumptions about alcohol. Creating a community culture that does not allow people to be aggressive after they consume alcohol is one aspect of this.

Another component is the empowerment of alcohol consumers to be able to question whether they enjoy the experience of intoxication. This ‘demystification’ approach has now spread and has earned Dr Samarasinghe recognition both in Sri Lanka and outside.

Without doubt, one of Prof. Samarasinghe’s most significant achievements was the role he played in tobacco control. His fight against tobacco started quite early. The efforts of his team, through years of challenging work, has paid off – and the anti-tobacco campaign remains a success in Sri Lanka.

One of the leading newspapers in the country, (The Daily Mirror) commended his work in its editorial, in 2014. An excerpt from the editorial is as follows:

(I quote:

“In the mid-1980s the State Television started featuring a young psychiatrist whose striking presence and intellectual vibrancy saw him carving an iconic niche for himself on screen.

In no time this young professor became the most sought after personality for television programmes on medical issues.

His forte was elucidating complex theories into simple aphorisms.

...

The impact this young psychiatrist had on television, and later on print media, was such that he almost had a cult following especially among the educated youth. Medical Students and thousands of school children from all corners of the country rallied around his den, the Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC) to fight the ills that retarded the country’s growth. For thirty years, initially from the front and later behind the curtains, Dr. Diyanath Samarasinghe led a movement that never took a proper break”.

...end of quote)

The scope of his activities and interests is wide.

He has for many years volunteered time to guide the treatment model used at 'Mel Medura', for empowering alcohol users, and to support the community mental wellbeing services of the non-profit organization, 'Nest'. *Nest* works to reduce stigmatization of people found HIV positive or diagnosed to have a mental illness.

While conducting all of these initiatives Dr Samarasinghe, in the 1990's, set up, guided and spread the activities of the non-profit organization, 'Foundation for Health Promotion'. The novel community-led methodology that he launched through it empowered people to address a variety of issues such as Child Growth and Development, schools health promotion, community mental wellbeing, HIV transmission, NCD risk, gender-based violence and suicide.

Dr. Samarasinghe has won many awards in appreciation of his contributions to society. Among these are:

- The "Tobacco or Health Medal" 1996 – from WHO, Geneva.
- Lakshmi Menon International Award for "Outstanding contribution to substance abuse prevention" 1997, from India's Alcohol and Drug Information Centre.
- The national honour "Vidya Jyothi" (in 1998) which is awarded for "Outstanding scientific or technological achievement" and
- The national honour Deshabandu (in 2005) for "contributions to the nation"

The special contribution Prof. Samarasinghe has made to Rajarata University of Sri Lanka has left a lasting impression. He was the pioneer in initiating the B.Sc. degree program in Health Promotion – the first in the South East Asian region – at the Faculty of Applied Sciences, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka in 2006.

At the request of the faculty members, he made a huge effort to set up the Health Promotion degree course, spearheading the drafting of the curriculum and by-laws and supporting the teaching of students until the graduation of the special degree students of the first batch.

The fieldwork component of this Health Promotion degree programme, entirely designed by him is unique. Its success has already attracted the attention of many foreign universities in countries such as Sweden, Japan, Nigeria, Singapore, Myanmar and Australia, who send their students to the Faculty of Applied Sciences.

His model of wellbeing development has been the key for developing the “community based health promotion approach” introduced by the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka.

The Faculty is extremely grateful that during the first six years, Prof. Samarasinghe served, in effect, as the Chief Consultant to the Health Promotion Study program without accepting any additional remuneration for this challenging and complex role.

The faculty gratefully acknowledges his role as the main person who developed the curriculum and carried the academic programme forward by guiding the lecturers and field work and initially taking responsibility over all its academic matters.

He gave immense support to the Health Promotion Division to develop contacts with national and international level professionals who in turn provided their expertise to the students.

In addition, he supported the Division to conduct international trainings and events and at present continues to provide his guidance on such occasions, whenever the need arises.

It could be said that Dr. Samarasinghe has the remarkable ability to guide people to see the unseen. This might have helped him in awakening and engaging communities to deal with many complex issues, using their own strength.

He has been an important advocate in battles against powerful entities such as the tobacco industry, alcohol industry and some other organizations. He possesses the ability to convincingly convey his insights to the public, thus helping them to see the unobtrusive forces which govern their life choices.

The young campaigners he has mentored as college and university students have today become fully fledged professionals. There is no doubt that these patriotic professionals and activists will continue to carry out his legacy, by responding to whatever new challenges emerge in the future.

Chancellor Sir,

in recognition of Professor Samarasinghe's national and international contribution in the fields of public health, scientific and social development and his distinguished service to the community,

it is with immense pleasure that I present to you Vidyajyothi Deshabandu Diyanath Samarasinghe, for the conferment of the degree of Doctor of Science (D.Sc.) *Honoris Causa*.