

Interview with Stalwart

Interview with – Prof. Sir Sabaratnam Arulkumaran

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Chettinad Health City Medical Journal 2016; 5(3): 165 - 166



Professor Sir Sabaratnam Arulkumaran is a world renowned Obstetrician and Gynaecologist of Srilankan Tamil descent who has served as President of the world's highest organization for Obstetrics and Gynaecology speciality, the International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) from 2002 to 2006. Sir S Arulkumaran graduated with an honours MBBS degree from the University of Ceylon in 1968. He went on to obtain his MD and Phd degrees from the National University of Singapore. After a stint of 15 years in Singapore he moved to the United Kingdom in 1997. He was professor and head of the OBGYN department at St. George's University of London from 2001-2013. He held various positions at the FIGO, like treasurer, Secretary – General before going on to become its President. He has held several prestigious positions such as President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (2007-2010) and president of the British Medical Association (2013-2014). He is an honorary fellow of various colleges of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists like ACOG, RANZCOG, FOGSI, SASOG, SLCOG, SOGOC to name a few. He has a keen interest in Research and academics. Sir Arulkumaran has been editor in chief of "Best Practices and Research in Clinical Obstetrics and Gynaecology" since 1998.

- 1) Sir, how did you feel, when you had to leave Srilanka, where you grew up and your father was in a prominent position as Director of Jaffna Cooperative Society, to go to Singapore?

It was a difficult decision to leave. I had a desire to do academic obstetrics and gynecology. I could not get an academic position in Sri Lanka as there were only three medical schools in the country at that time. Singapore offered that possibility and hence I left.

- 2) Sir, who has been the best influence in your life?

My parents – my father supported my enthusiasm to do my best and my mother moulded my character. After marriage – my wife Gayathri gave me the freedom to pursue my academic pursuits and looked after our family well.

- 3) Sir, what inspired you to do your Masters in Obs and Gyn even after you had completed your Diploma in Child Health from the University of Ceylon?

I liked Pediatrics and Obstetrics and Gynecology. The children suffering from illness created emotional stress to me and the possibility of doing surgery enticed me to do Obs & Gyn.

- 4) Sir, during your tenure as President of FIGO what were the challenges you faced with regard to Women's health issues in the third world countries?

There were many but the most urgent need was to prevent innocent mothers dying for want of resources and skilled care that does not cost much. My three areas of focus were contraception, provision of safe abortion and emergency obstetric care especially management of PPH.

- 5) Sir, what do you perceive as your greatest achievement till date in your Professional life?

Being academic clinician alone does not change policies. Policies and their implementation is best

done through Professional organizations. Hence my greatest achievement was to become President of the Royal College of O&G, British Medical Association and FIGO that enabled me to work with like-minded colleagues to improve delivery of health care.

- 6) Sir, the FIGO and various national federations of Obs&Gynae, are we on the right track in tackling maternal mortality?

Yes - we are in the right track – In 2015 we recognized that Globally we did not reach 75% reduction but we achieved about 50% reduction. If we pursue our effort we can achieve considerable reduction.

- 7) Sir, please describe your feelings when you were conferred Knighthood by Her Majesty the Queen!

It was a magnificent feeling – being recognized for my services to medicine and health care.

- 8) Sir, you have written and published many books and papers. Which aspect of Obstetrics is closest to your heart?

My main interest is high risk obstetrics and intrapartum care – I worked and researched mainly in intrapartum care as this area of work if well done would reduce the number of maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality.

- 9) Sir, what are the key areas of research that we as Obstetricians and Gynecologists must focus upon?

All areas of obstetrics and gynecology are important. The key areas of research should be on those that affects more women and the areas that may have an impact on future health. In Obstetrics pre-eclampsia, preterm labor and intrauterine growth restriction and in Gynecology reproductive tract malignancies especially cervical cancer, subfertility and care of the aging population.

- 10) Sir, on a personal note, have you been able to spend quality time with your family?

My frank answer is not enough time – there are so many hours in a day and the more you do in one area you sacrifice other pleasures. What-ever time we spent together was pleasant and I am grateful to God for giving me an understanding family.

- 11) Sir, what advice would you like to give post graduates and young consultants throughout the world who are following your footsteps and your writings (books).

Be committed, compassionate, communicate well, have confidence by having the knowledge and skills needed, be a leader and team player and have patient's need as first and self needs as secondary.