

Inspirational Interview



Prof. Dr. S. Subramanian MD, MRCP (UK)
Sr. Medical Oncologist
Chairman & Managing Director
VS Hospitals, Chennai

Prof. Dr. S. Subramanian, commonly referred to as the Father of Modern Day Oncology, has worked hard to serve millions of cancer patients who could not afford the necessary medical treatment and set up the first medical Oncology department at Madras Medical College. He also started his own private practice called VS Hospitals, where he strived to provide equitable care to cancer patients. This interview was conducted by two individuals: Dr. Meena Sadaps (a practicing Oncologist) and Krithika Muthuraman (a young adult aspiring to go into the medical field).



Krithika Muthuraman (Interviewer)
Freshman at the University of Michigan



Dr. Meena Sadaps MD (Interviewer)
Assistant Professor, Clinical Director
GI Medical Oncology and Precision Medicine
Rush University Cancer Center

Dr. Meena: What led you down a career path in medicine, and that too, specifically in Oncology?

Dr. S. Subramanian: My brother-in-law wanted to pursue a career in medicine and unfortunately he could not, so he asked me to pursue a career in medicine because I came first in my school. Because I got good marks, I got selected to go into medicine with many problems. Initially, I wanted to pursue a career in Cardiology. But, my professor wanted me to pursue a career in Oncology as he had a vision that cancer would grow to be a huge medical problem in the future, leading me down a career path in Oncology.

Dr. Meena: Can you walk us through your medical journey and what made you want to practice in India rather than settling down in the UK?

Dr. S. Subramanian: Initially when I applied for my MBBS, I applied to Madurai College for the pre-professional course and Madras Medical College for medicine. But, because of my high marks, the selection committee chose me for Madras Medical College. Out of the 48 people who traveled with me at Madras Medical College, only 4 people pulled through, and I was one of the four to pass MD there. I wanted to be an Assistant Professor at Madras Medical College, but it was very difficult, and I was posted at Thanjavur Medical College. After 3 years at the Thanjavur Medical College, my professor asked me to take over the department of medical Oncology at Madras Medical College. At the time, there was no institution giving training in medical Oncology, so through the Colombo

plan, the government of India applied and I was selected for a fellowship program in Royal Marston, UK. I was there for 3 years and afterwards, I came back to India and further developed the Department of Medical Oncology.

Dr. Meena: What were some of the challenges that you faced in building the first Oncology department in Chennai?

Dr. S. Subramanian: In my days, cancer wasn't a major problem, and so there were not many facilities available at the time. In the past 25 years, many new treatments have emerged, and we can successfully treat 70% of the patients. At the time, many people were not interested in developing the Oncology department, so I had great difficulty in starting the PG course. Many people left the department claiming that every other person dies and it's very depressing. But, now we can treat a lot of people. Also, the funds





allocated to the Oncology department were very small, so we had to fight with the administration until I could convince the director of medical administration that cancer was going to be a big problem in the future.

Dr. Meena: How would you say that you have been maintaining the same level of energy and passion in your practice?

Dr. S. Subramanian: It is in our genes. Basically, us Nagarathars never feel like retiring. That's how I entered medicine and the field of Oncology and never felt like retiring. Now, we are treating many patients with a lot of success and that gives a lot of satisfaction.

Dr. Meena: What would you say is the most rewarding part of your field?

Dr. S. Subramanian: There are two things: service and teaching. I have been teaching about cancer for the past 60 years, and for the past 30 years, I have been treating poor people, giving me a lot of satisfaction. You are there to alleviate the suffering of your fellow human beings and comfort them while prolonging their life. Also, starting the PG course has definitely been very satisfying.

Dr. Meena: What are some endearing qualities that a great clinician should have?

Dr. S. Subramanian: You have to have a good theoretical background of medicine, some clinical experience, have compassion, have empathy, have patience, gear the treatment towards the person, and see the person as a whole.

Dr. Meena: How have you been able to keep up with new literature and practice guidelines?

Dr. S. Subramanian: We concentrate on common problems and be up to date on those common issues. Daily, I spend a minimum of one hour reading new journals and teaching my students.

Dr. Meena: Can you elaborate on rural Oncology care in India?

Dr. S. Subramanian: The majority of the people we treat are poor people. In the past 25 years, we had 30 beds to start with and we allotted free beds, free food, free consultation fees, and subsidized medication at a lower price. The government gives poor people 5 lakhs every two years for their medical expenses.

Dr. Meena: How do you manage the shortages of certain medications in the past and how will you account for them in the future?

Dr. S. Subramanian: We never felt shortages outside

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of the hospital as we have a lot of pharmaceutical companies manufacturing the drugs. However, inside the hospitals, sometimes they run out of medicines. You also cannot ask the government to buy medicine outside. Even now, due to the rise of the prices of medicines, this problem exists. Nowadays, middle class people have insurance which helps alleviate the disparity by a little.

Dr. Meena: How do you respond to patients who want to pursue a herbal remedy path rather than a traditional medication based on?

Dr. S. Subramanian: I tell them that allopathy is the only system where you have a diagnosis and follow ups, so don't go to other systems of medicine. However, if patients come in an advanced stage, I tell them you can choose whatever medicine system you prefer to follow.

Dr. Meena: How have you addressed mental health in your practice?

Dr. S. Subramanian: We are very frank with them and tell them the outcome that we expect to occur. But, still patients are under the impression that cancer is an incurable disease. People in India believe that you do your duty and God will take care of the rest so you should be ready to face the reality.

Dr. Meena: Any advice on how you transition patients into a more palliative, hospice approach?

Dr. S. Subramanian: We tell them whether or not we can cure them or can only prolong their life. We promise them that we will keep them comfortable. We slowly prepare them for the situation.

Dr. Meena: Can you talk to us about the different methods you use to bring cancer awareness to the people in India?

Dr. S. Subramanian: I went to all IMAs all over Tamilnadu and spoke to all the family doctors over the importance of chemotherapy, screening, and cancer awareness. We held many cancer awareness meetings and cancer screenings with the general public.

Dr. Meena: Can you comment on the importance of collaboration with others in order to develop Oncology further as a field?

Dr. S. Subramanian: We have conducted combined trials with many western Oncologists, getting newer facilities and drugs through them. Collaboration allows newer drugs and facilities to immediately reach our patients.

Krithika: How do you keep yourself motivated during tough times when you were studying for medicine?

Dr. S. Subramanian: You have to read for long hours (at least 6 hours a day) and concentrate. Even after college hours, I used to read a lot which gave me a lot of inspiration and motivation as I gained more knowledge. If you spend that time studiously, you will come on top of it.

Krithika: Any advice for young people aspiring to go into the medical field?

Dr. S. Subramanian: Don't think of medicine as a profession, but develop a service-minded mentality

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towards it. If you do the service, money will come automatically. So, concentrate on giving your service and satisfaction and money will follow.

Krithika: Nagarathars are a small race in terms of the population of the world, but they have impacted the world in a big way. Why do you think that is?

Dr. S. Subramanian: Nagarathars are special and we make up a great community. We are always soft, kind, cordial, helpful, hardworking, and follow the rules. We are very good in mathematics, so Nagarathars are mentally very sharp. We are also known for our philanthropy and cultural values. The values we hold in our genes help us build a strong community right from the very beginning where hard work is put above anything and everything else.

Medicine is a service!



Krithika Muthuraman, A.Thekkur

My name is Krithika Muthuraman and I'm currently a freshman at the University of Michigan. I've always wanted to pursue a career in medicine. My hobbies are reading and making arts and crafts.

