

V. Ramalingaswami – *An obituary*

Professor Vulimiri Ramalingaswami, Rama to his friends, was born in Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh, on 8 August 1921. He passed away on 28 May 2001 after a brief illness at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. His passing away is an irreparable national loss and an end of an era.

Rama obtained his first medical degree in 1944 from Andhra Pradesh, his MD in internal medicine in 1946 from the same university, a D.Phil. and D.Sc. respectively in 1951 and 1967 from Oxford, UK. Rama was an excellent amateur theater actor depicting many Shakespearean characters when he was a student at college. He was also an excellent singer who has livened many parties. His diction was good and his theatrical training stood him in good stead – his delivery of speech was truly remarkable for their clarity of expression.

His research career started at Conoor in the Nilgiris in the 1940s and extended over the next six decades. He believed in pursuing basic knowledge for a better understanding of causes and mechanisms of human diseases prevalent in developing countries and equally in the application of that knowledge for human betterment through research. The hallmark of his research is its humane approach and in promoting a meaningful synthesis of laboratory, clinical and community-based research.

Ramalingaswami's contributions to the pathophysiology of protein-energy malnutrition are well known (*Nature*, 1964, **201**, 546–551; *Lancet*, 1969, 733–735). These works and his personal commitment and leadership contributed to the highly successful operation for the nutritional protection and rehabilitation of millions of refugees at the time of the Bangladesh war during 1970–1971 and the great Bihar famine of 1967.

Ramalingaswami's classic experiment in public health was carried out in the Kangra Valley involving a population of 100,000, in which he showed that fortification of common salt with

potassium iodate prevented the consequences of iodine deficiency entirely. This work laid the foundation for the National Iodine Deficiency Control Programme in India where nearly 270 million people are protected. Likewise, intra-uterine iodine deficiency is being eliminated which is believed to be the cause of nearly 6 million developmental disorders such as deaf-autism and cretinism.



On another front, successful introduction of iron supplementation in the antenatal period and in childhood is believed to be the single most important measure for the improvement of the health of women and children worldwide.

Another significant contribution of Ramalingaswami is the discovery of a new syndrome of liver diseases known as 'non-cirrhotic portal hypertension' that has advanced knowledge on a fatal form of liver disease in India, known as Indian Childhood Cirrhosis.

Rama was truly a multifaceted personality. Not every one could know all his traits and accomplishments. He lived a very eventful life as a Professor of Pathology, at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi and

later as its Director. He moved up to become the Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research. During his entire professional career he made a great impact on the minds of many who had the good fortune to come in contact with him.

He has been honoured Nationally and Internationally. He is a recipient of the Shanthi Swarup Bhatnagar Award, a Padma Bhushan and many other honorary degrees and titles from various Universities. He was a Fogarty Fellow, a visiting Professor at Boston, Special Adviser to the World Health Organization, President of the National Institute of Immunology and a National Research Professor.

He was elected Fellow of several science academies including Indian National Science Academy; Indian Academy of Sciences; National Academy of Medical Sciences, Royal Society, UK; Foreign Associate, National Academy of Sciences, USA; Foreign Member, Academy of Medical Sciences, Russia; Past President, Indian National Science Academy; Honorary Fellow, American College of Physicians; Fellow, Royal College of Physicians; London and Royal College of Pathologists, UK; Former Chairman, Global Advisory Committee of Medical Research; WHO, Honorary Doctorate Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, etc.

Despite earning all these and several more Awards and recognition Rama was always down to earth. As far as I am aware, he used his position of authority for bettering the lives of those he led. There is hardly anyone who did not benefit from his munificence. Even his worst critics had to seek his help, which was always forthcoming. May his soul rest in peace.

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