

Cyril Jeffrey Babapulle (1939–2006)

'You live and learn... then you die and forget it all'

– Sir Noel Coward

The sudden death of Cyril Jeffrey Babapulle at the age of 66 on 29 May 2006 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, deprived the Sri Lankan Medical Profession of one of its greatest exponents of forensic science. His death came as a sad blow to everyone who had known him, but the blow was particularly hard on those who had worked with him or had benefited from his personal kindness or professional assistance. His death has left a deep void in the scientific community, and it will always remain a source of profound sadness to all of us who were privileged to have known him. He had been in failing health for some months, but had faced his illness bravely with equanimity, great mental and physical courage, and religious conviction. Jeff's family was by his side when he passed away. It was the end of a beautiful life.

Jeff was born in Colombo on 10 December 1939 – the eldest of the six children of Cyril and Marjorie Babapulle. The Babapulles belong to a distinct ethnic group referred to as the 'Colombo Chettys', who number about 150,000 today. They have a history that dates as far back as the coming of Vijaya to ancient Ceylon. The legend tells us that one of the three kings from the Orient who went to adore infant Jesus in Bethlehem was a Colombo Chetty by the name Perumal (but others, including the Babapulles have disputed it!).

The Babapulles include four generations of doctors. Jeff's parents valued education above anything else. With unbounded confidence in the abilities of their children, Cyril and Marjorie gave them a good Catholic education to instil discipline and develop their character. Jeff was sent to St. Joseph's College in Colombo, where he excelled in studies and was made the Senior Prefect. He became a compulsive and voracious reader at a young age and began building a small library at home. Being a clever student, there was no doubt that he was destined for a career in medicine. The standing joke was that it was awful to be a Babapulle and be stupid. The block chipped and Jeff, following his father's footsteps, entered the Colombo

Medical College in 1960. In the very first year itself, he proposed to a demure young girl named Mary Jacob. Jeff and Mary married in 1967.

Having graduated from the Ceylon Medical College with honours in the second class, Jeff worked for several years as the Medical Officer of Health at Wattegama, and then as the Medical Officer at the Bogambara Prisons, and subsequently joined the Department of Pathology at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya on secondment as Lecturer for two years. He received permanent tenure as Lecturer at the Department of Forensic Medicine in 1983, where his career proceeded along a smoothly ascending trajectory from Lecturer to Professor, solely on the strength of his phenomenal research and publications. He had a M. Med. Science in Medical Education and two Ph Ds, one in law and the other in logic, and an M D. He wrote several books on a variety of topics that included medical education, law, logic, forensic toxicology, and medical physics, to name a few. His last book entitled, *Medical Diagnosis* is to be published posthumously, since his illness stalled its publication.

At the Faculty of Medicine (University of Peradeniya), there was no downside to being C. Jeffrey Babapulle. He was a towering figure with a stern exterior that belied a gentle and generous nature. He rarely took leave and was at his desk putting long hours of work with religious regularity until the very day he retired in December 2004 as Professor and Head of the Department of Forensic Science. As a teacher, he had few rivals. He was adored by students, and he knew almost every student by name. Jeff was both a teacher and friend to his students, whose academic performance remained always his prime concern. He enjoyed life and this enjoyment spread to those around him. His forte was the possession of a lucid mind, a booming voice, and an excellent command of the English language in all its subtleties. He had enviable qualities of clarity and imagination, qualities that many academics lack today. There was something hypnotic about the way he looked at you. He had a sense of the theatre. Like the late Hilary Cruz, the power to keep people spellbound was partly a mat-

ter of his personality, for he knew the art of oral scientific presentation. He rarely used technology to enliven his lectures; instead he often used the 'pregnant pause' to mesmerize his students. His lectures and ward classes were hilarious as he enlivened them with anecdotes derived from his experience and recollection. There would be peals of laughter from the students. All this made Jeff a gifted teacher who was able to explain even critical medicolegal issues in a clear and concise manner.

Our paths crossed in the mid-1970, when Jeff would discuss books with me. He was particularly keen to understand the mind of the Jesuit biologist and palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who in his seminal work, *The Phenomenon of Man* tried to reconcile his Christian theology with the scientific theory of evolution. Another thinker who had a profound influence on Jeff was the Nobel Prize-winning French biologist Jacques Monod, who was probably well known for his book, *Chance and Necessity* published in 1970, in which he put forward the view that 'Pure chance, only chance, absolute but blind liberty is at the root of the prodigious edifice that is evolution'. Jeff had a wide interest in all aspects of life, and at his home, you never knew whether you were in for a discussion on science, art, literature or music. He was a great lover of music and gardening, both of which gave him hours of pleasure and relaxation. He would spend hours watering the plants. His taste in music was diverse, ranging from the classical, instrumental to vocal. He maintained an eclectic collection of records, all of which he gifted to me when he left Kandy following his retirement.

His work took him to many countries, including the US, Canada, France, Turkey, Australia, India, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore; the last being a stint in East Timor on a mission for the UN's World Health Organization in 2001. He enjoyed his travels, but had a strong aversion for any outward show.

The tragic and untimely death of their eldest son Naresh in the US was a blow from which Jeff and Mary never recovered. It may have even triggered the decline in Jeff's health. The sadness plunged Jeff into a deep grief that amounted virtually

to melancholy. Jeff could never come to terms with the death of his son. And for the rest of his life, Jeff lived with the thoughts of his dead son never far from the surface of his mind. Even in the twilight of his academic career, Jeff remained alert and conscientious, although a trace of pessimism and melancholy could be discerned during conversations.

I have been fortunate in my friends; among them, one of the most important was Jeff for whom I have the greatest respect, affection and admiration as a man, mentor and polymath. Jeff was among the most civilized, courteous and considerate of men, and his conversations, both scientific and social, have always been stimulating, provocative and just.

With Jeff gone, I find the world cold and less joyful.

CHARLES SANTIAPILLAI

*Department of Zoology,
University of Peradeniya,
Sri Lanka
e-mail: csantiapillai@gmail.com*
