

Deputy Chairman Jayantha Dharmadasa: Persevering Towards Excellence



The Nawaloka Group has been in the forefront of the business sector in Sri Lanka for over 65 years. Ranging from medical services to construction, aviation and manufacturing facilities abroad, the services rendered by the Group to the Nation is commendable. Striving to give the best quality services to the people at a low cost, the Nawaloka Hospital has earned the reputation as the flagship company of the group and has many firsts in its name. Deputy Chairman Jayantha Dharmadasa discussed the many achievements of the Group with Business Today, focusing primarily on Nawaloka Hospital. A respected gentleman in his own right, his philosophy is to live each day to the fullest while thinking ahead, a strategy undoubtedly successful as made evident by the performance of the Group.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe
Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Nawaloka Hospital was established as the first private hospital in Sri Lanka in 1985. Can you tell us how the hospital was started?

The hospital was built on the philosophy of *Arogya Parama Laba* or good health is the supreme wealth. When my father fell ill, he was taken to London for treatment, as the required facilities were not available in Sri Lanka at that time. At the Hammersmith Hospital in London, my father saw the services and facilities that were available for the patients and he thought the same should be and could be provided for the Sri Lankan people. As soon as he returned to Sri Lanka he started on the hospital project. That was the beginning. The land on which the Hospital now stands used to be a marketplace which was cleared and a 100 bed hospital was built on the land.

While I am the Deputy Chairman, Prof Lal Chandrasena is Director/General Manager and Givantha and Harshith Dharmadasa are Directors of Nawaloka Hospitals.

Nawaloka Hospital is known for its many facilities and there are many firsts in your name such as the first ICU and CT Scanner in Sri Lanka. Can you elaborate on this?

Yes, Nawaloka Hospital introduced the first Intensive Care Unit in Sri Lanka in August 1985 and even today it is the largest in the country. The first CT Scanner was introduced in July 1987. As the early detection of cancer can save lives the first Mammography unit was instated in September 1992. In 1993 we introduced minimally invasive Laparoscopic Surgery to Sri Lanka. Then the first MRI scanner was introduced to the country in 1995. The Lasik Eye Centre was introduced to Sri Lanka a few years ago in order to restore eye-sight through pain free high tech laser solutions. Nawaloka has been in the forefront of fertility treatment where we provide the service together with an Indian affiliate.

The main reason as to why we decided to provide these facilities was that there were no ICU or emergency services in the private sector in Sri Lanka, but were only available at the Government Hospitals. But there is a limit to how many patients

they can treat. Therefore we felt that it was pertinent to provide these facilities at Nawaloka as well.

Can you tell us about the cardiac unit in the hospital; is it true that many people do not need to go abroad as these facilities are available in the hospital?

That's right. During the late President Premadasa's time, he invited the private sector and the Government sector hospital directors to start a cardiac unit in Sri Lanka, as there was an exodus of foreign currency going out of the country to India, Singapore and London. I was the first to say yes. That was the beginning of the cardiac centre in Sri Lanka. At that time the total cost was about Rs 200 million. We took the risk and started the cardiac unit with a full team of Surgeons, Anaesthetists and support staff coming from the University of Wales. In 1994 we built a separate ten-storey building, which included a cardiac catheterisation laboratory and a coronary artery bypass surgery unit. This unit completes 15 years this year and has performed over 8000 open-heart surgeries and 20,000 catheterisation lab procedures. The centre provides a 24 hour service to both adult and paediatric heart patients in this country. We are proud to say that the Nawaloka Heart Centre is on par with any international Heart Centre in USA, UK or Singapore.

Nawaloka Hospital has introduced a fertility centre with an Indian affiliate; can you elaborate on the services?

Yes, this is another first that Nawaloka Hospitals has introduced to Sri Lanka. Two Indian doctors run the centre and it is very successful. We ensure 100% confidentiality. We do not advertise or give any publicity to the centre; we only say that we have a fertility centre at Nawaloka.

Nawaloka Hospital has been constantly evolving and last year a new wing was built, can you tell us how important such new developments are?

It is very important. The trend today is to see a Consultant. Not to see a Medical Officer or a General Practitioner. Therefore with the demand we had to provide the facilities that are required by our patients. We have approximately 200 Consultants specialising in all areas working at Nawaloka. Additionally, a new complex was

added to the existing facility comprising of eight floors with fourteen ultra modern surgical theatres. We have thirteen theatres whereas we had only six before. All the ICUs have been brought to one location as it was scattered around in our initial layout. Now we have a fifty bed ICU, which includes medical intensive care, surgical, cardiac and cardiac after care.

Nawaloka Hospital Introduced The First Intensive Care Unit In Sri Lanka In August 1985 And Even Today It Is The Largest In The Country.

Can you tell me how Nawaloka Hospital is promoting medical tourism?

This is a recent concept. While I was in Dubai, I saw many people going to Singapore and London for treatment and the thought crossed my mind as to why we never promote medical tourism in Sri Lanka because we have all the facilities. We have embarked on this service, where the patient is taken to and from the airport with all facilities provided. A unique feature of the newly constructed complex is the luxury and semi luxury suites and villas that have been designed to attract foreign patients from around the world. All facilities will be provided with ample space and the rooms will have either an aerial view of the city or a water front view. We want the patients to have the best environment that will be conducive to their recovery.

Can you tell us about the new website that was launched for the Heart Centre? What benefits would the patients have from this?

A heart patient becomes weak both mentally and physically. We have to understand this and move quickly on a priority basis. We have the infrastructure and the staff ready to deal with such situations. Therefore we launched a website for the Heart Centre with the aim of educating the general public about the available healthcare options. It also provides valuable information to educate the families and the patients on a variety of common heart health procedures. By logging on to the website, they would know which Consultants are available and at what time. They can obtain information on what test needs to be done and much more. They will not have to waste any time.

Can you also tell us about the hospitality card that was introduced to the corporate sector?

The hospitality card was introduced recently; it takes care of the patient as soon as he reaches the hospital or if he calls from his house. The patient's entire medical history is with us. We started with the corporate sector and we have expanded to include individuals as well. For the corporate sector, having a hospitality card entails a special corporate customer care counter that handles OPD treatments, Admissions, Health Check ups and Pre employment Medicals. There are many more facilities included in this package.

What is unique about Nawaloka Hospitals?

Nawaloka is the people's hospital and the hospital of tomorrow. Although the buildings are new and modern, the charges are low and very reasonable, compared to the other private hospitals. We always challenge and say that our charges are the lowest in the market. I am talking only about the hospital charges. There are variations in consultation fees. However we make sure that we give a very good deal to the patient. We provide all facilities from the room and then we have our in-house surgeons and physicians as well, therefore considering everything, patients are offered a good deal.

My Father Built Up This Company With Sheer Determination. During Our Childhood We Didn't See Him In The Morning Or In The Night. He Would Leave Home Very Early And Come Back Very Late.

There are many who feel that the medical sector has become more money oriented, can you tell us how Nawaloka Hospital has moved away from this?

We have not moved away from this. We have to charge patients reasonably so as to improve and provide a good service. It is just that we charge a very low rate. As I mentioned earlier our rates are quite reasonable and we give a very good deal to the patient. We have some insurance teams because for everything we need to pay duty. It is the cost factor that makes it a heavy burden on our services which in turn has a bearing on our charges. It is our staff that makes us unique. They are highly work oriented and competent.

Can you tell us about the many awards and achievements of the hospital?

We were the first hospital to win the National Quality Award in 1998. We are the only ISO certified private hospital in the country, which is also another first. In 2000, WHO and UNICEF selected us as the baby friendly hospital. The National Chamber of Commerce awarded us the Excellence Award for health. Then we have received recognition from the Heart Association as well. I must emphasise though that we have never gone after or expected any awards for our services, they have come our way.

What are the Hospital's future plans and strategy as you move forward?

We keep up with advancing technology and services. We have finalised the purchase of new CT and MRI Scanners, that will be the best available in the world. There is only one such CT scanner available in the Asian region. In order to give the best possible services we are upgrading our MRI scanner. We are acquiring two digital X – rays. I have mentioned just a few of some of the things that we will be acquiring. We will be starting a new 'liver' transplant unit in the near future.

The Nawaloka Group of Companies has been a pillar to the Sri Lankan economy, can you tell us the story behind the journey of the group and how your father built up the group?

My father established the Nawaloka Group of Companies 65 years ago without having even Rs 50-70 in his hands. He built up this company with sheer determination. During our childhood we didn't see him in the morning or in the night. He would leave home very early and come back very late. Even in my life, after finishing my higher education I worked as a clerk, then chief clerk, cashier, workshop manager, purchasing officer and so on. I too earned my position here. That is why we are with the people.

Looking at the Group, we diversified our interests with time, from small-scale boutique hotels to timber, then to building construction. Now we have C1 status, which is the highest rating in the building trade. With our roadwork company we have received the M1 rating. Another part of our Group is importing heavy machinery.

Nawaloka Polysack Limited is our factory in Sharjah, Dubai. We manufacture polypropylene bags which are used to store sugar, wheat, fertiliser etc at this plant. We employ 150 Sri Lankans and 15 Indians at the Dubai factory. All work is done to international standards and the factory is now the number one factory in Dubai. The Nawaloka name is written in Sinhala on the lorry and the Sri Lankan national flag flies high over the premises. We are proud that we are Sri Lankans because most of the Sri Lankans who go abroad, they work for someone, even if you are professional, a mason or a house maid you work for a different nationality. Now here, we have our own factory, we are the owners of the factory in the sense that there are no sponsors. Since the factory is in the zone an expatriate can be the owner. Within eight months of commencing operations, the zone held a competition where they took into consideration all aspects including manpower, cleanliness and operational procedures and I am proud to say that we were awarded the Gold medal which was presented to us by the ruler of Sharjah.

Nawaloka Construction Company has been associated with the largest housing programme as well as the Mahaweli Development programme. Can you elaborate on the success of this company?

Yes, it was about 15 years ago that we completed the largest construction programme in Sri Lanka. We built the housing scheme in Maththegoda which was the first and largest done by the Government of Sri Lanka. Over the years we have constructed many buildings including Spathodea Residencies owned by HNB, which we handed over last month. The company has completed many road construction projects as well.

Nawaloka Aviations is one of the first appointed General Sales Agents for Air Arabia, can you elaborate as to why Nawaloka decided to venture in the aviation industry and why specifically Air Arabia?

That again is a low cost airline, we always think about the people who don’t have money to travel. It is the low cost airline run by the Sharjah based airline. Though there were only two flights a week we have brought it up to ten flights a week. The airline itself is not low cost, but we have ensured that it is low cost for the passenger.

To divert a bit, you are a very prominent person in society, you have done

much for the film industry and also cricket, can you tell us a bit about you as person?

Actually both positions were given to me. I have not been involved in politics. I was the Chairman of the Film Corporation about four years ago during the previous Government. Then again with this Government I was appointed as the Chairman. Likewise in cricket, it is the same. I was appointed as the Chairman of the Sri Lanka Cricket Board. These positions were given to me after due recognition of my work. At the time I took over the Cricket Board, the Sri Lankan team was at number seven and we had to qualify for the World Cup, but within a year I brought the team up to number two in the world. We could have become number one if not for the Gilchrist inning. That is some achievement.

What are your future plans?

We worked on a day-to-day basis. We were not sure about anything during the last 25-30 years and we couldn't plan anything. We were just going on. But with the new environment, we can now have plans for the future. We have a 24% stake in Galadari Hotel. We are planning many things with this investment because tourism is picking up and tourists will be coming to Sri Lanka by December. We have many plans for the hotel.

If you know what you are doing and you work hard for it, you will undoubtedly be able to achieve it, that is my philosophy. At Nawaloka what I have told my people is, you are not living in 2009. Think one year ahead. So all the managers and everyone here think one year ahead. In that way we are with the rest of the world. We don't wait. We think for 2010. That is why we can always keep our heads up when many are trying to survive. We still manage our share of Corporate Social Responsibility like building temples and places of worship and helping needy children with heart surgery.