

Embracing Life



The Sri Lanka Cancer Society was founded in 1948 and has since, for almost 63 years, been continuously providing services to those who are suffering from cancer, and their families, thereby being of immense benefit to the entire society. With the aim of creating awareness and sensitising the community, as very early detection of the illness in most instances will lead to cure, President of the Sri Lanka Cancer Society Justice Shiranee Tilakawardane spoke to Business Today about the services and facilities provided by the organisation, the role it plays in the greater community and the future plans of the Sri Lanka Cancer Society as it moves forward.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photography by Mahesh Prasantha

The main objectives of the Sri Lanka Cancer Society are to assist, advice and provide relief to cancer patients and their loved ones. Educating the public also makes up a large part of the Society's activities, and awareness projects about cancer, its early detection and timely treatment are conducted regularly through the public education unit in different parts of the Island. The Society also places great importance on establishing and maintaining institutions dedicated to care for people living with cancer.

Elaborating on the functions of the Society, its President, Justice Shiranee Tilakawardane said, "The Cancer Society has built and maintains a cancer home for 85 patients in Maharagama, which provides nourishment to indoor and outdoor cancer patients, who are treated at the cancer hospital. It also assists needy patients with travel grants after treatment and pays a monthly grant to 120 outdoor patients. The Society operates a canteen at the Maharagama cancer hospital for patients and their visitors. Shantha Sevana, the hospice established at Maharagama by the Society takes care of 34 patients who are terminally ill with cancer. Poly clinics are conducted once a month to screen patients for all types of cancers." What is most significant is that the Sri Lanka Cancer Society provides all these services free of charge, and mostly through volunteers, thereby ensuring that the neediest segments of the community have access to the best treatment. The Society not only fulfills predefined needs but when something is identified that is of utmost importance either to the patient or their families the Society does not hesitate to step in. As Justice Tilakawardane explained, "It came to our attention many years ago that the cancer patients themselves had to buy boiling water for their needs from the canteen, at the Maharagama Cancer Hospital. This is a basic essential need. Many patients who are treated at this hospital are poor and they come from far away places. Therefore we identified this need, stepped in with permission from the authorities and took the responsibility of managing the canteen," she further added, "the people who work for us are volunteers, and those on our committees never even think of requesting a salary from the society for their services." The Sri Lanka Cancer Society network extends to branches around the country in Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Moratuwa, Anuradhapura and Batticaloa. The success of the Society is due to the dedication of its Executive Committee, its volunteers and perseverance of the people who work in its branches.

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Having experienced the ramifications of the disease due to personal loss of her mother, Justice Tilakawardane stressed the need of educating the public on the importance of early detection of cancer. “Today we know that ovarian cancer, breast cancer, and prostate cancer to name a few can be cured almost 100 percent if it is detected very early”, said Justice Tilakawardane. As such the Sri Lanka Cancer Society conducts programmes that include discussions, films, exhibitions, radio and television programmes, provision of awareness literature and talks even by cancer survivors themselves, who speak positively about management of the disease, in order to bring sensitisation, awareness and to identify the symptoms so that they can seek early treatment. “To detect breast cancer, we have the mammogram, which can detect it very early. Today for prostate cancer there is the man-o-gram, but this machine is not available in Sri Lanka. Therefore we hope donors will assist to bring this machine to Sri Lanka while keeping in mind that maintenance costs will also be required. Our services are always on the basis of long term sustainability.” said Justice Tilakawardane.

A major problem in Sri Lanka is the social stigma associated with cancer, which has resulted as a bar to persons seeking treatment even when they know that they may be having the illness. “In Sri Lanka we hear people who are diagnosed negative for cancer saying *api pau karayo nemei*, implying that it is only those who have sinned that get affected by cancer. But it is not the patients who are the sinners but those who contribute to the causes of cancer, who pollute the environment, adulterate food and destroy life and nature out of ignorance or for short term financial gains.” Elaborating further, she said that dispelling stigma will encourage individuals to get them tested for cancer, and thereby they stand a better chance of being cured. “A village woman or a man – when they feel that lump they will think, ‘now I won’t get stigmatised’ and will come out and say, ‘I have a lump, I need to get it attended to. This will lead to early detection. It is about bringing about an attitudinal change, and creating a new paradigm. Therefore the Society aims to create a mindset and attitudinal change through education. Future plans include our personal visits on awareness programmes beginning with Kuliyaipitiya and Batticaloa hospital. The message is, cancer is just another disease – do not stigmatise it and further marginalise those who suffer from it.”

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Cancer does not affect only the patient but also their families and loved ones. Therefore the Sri Lanka Cancer Society also focuses on providing counseling and support to the families and loved ones of cancer patients. Educating them too is essential as their support is required for early detection as well as recovery of the cancer patient.

Periodically, fund raising events are held to support the projects implemented by the Society and the first ever walk and carnival was one of these events. “Those who participated gave enthusiastically even their talents and worked with singular dedication. To be part of it was an awe inspiring experience.” said Justice Tilakawardane. “I was also amazed by the multifaceted talents and the awesome commitment and integrity of my Committee. I couldn’t believe I had such a talented set of people in this country and I was privileged to have worked with them in my Walk for Cancer organising committee. Not only did they give their talents, they gave themselves, focused completely and tirelessly to the cause.” Justice Tilakawardane attributes the recent success of the walk and parade organised by the Sri Lanka Cancer Society to its dedicated Committee, especially the determination of the Chairperson, E P Mannakkara, Perin Captain, Ramani Fernando, Haadia Galely, Priya Cabraal, Tony Ange, Asgi Akberally, Neela Marrikar, Sarath Piyaratne, DIG Asoka Wijetilleke, Commodore Bandara, Siraj Cader, Shobi Perera , Mano Alles, Ameena Mustapha, Veena Jayasundera and Arlene Saparamadu, to name a few of them. Even the World Health Organisation through Dr Mehta came on board in the end. The carnival atmosphere of the walk accomplished exactly what the procession set out to do – it celebrated life- even if you have cancer. Proceeding along C W W Kannangara Mawatha, Dharmapala Mawatha, Marcus Fernando Mawatha and ending up at Green Path, the Walk drew attention to the importance of early detection and timely treatment.

In addition to creating awareness about cancer, the Society planned the Walk to educate the public of its functions as well as the ways in which individuals can extend their help.

A significant message that the Walk promoted was the fact that cancer is a curable disease, provided it is detected and treated early. The participation of many people, who had battled against cancer and survived, was evidence of this fact. "We wanted more awareness as to what early detection could do. We wanted to sensitise and give awareness to the community of people that we live in. And we wanted to celebrate survival; we wanted to say we do survive cancer and we celebrate their lives. Cancer is not a sentence, it is just a word, and life is about living- even with cancer," said Justice Tilakawardane. The walk also focused on informing people that there was no reason to attach any kind of stigma against people living with cancer. "Our group was about getting together, in unity, to protest against the branding, the marginalising, the stigmatisation of those who have cancer and to promote and accept cancer like any other illness. We want individuals to be heard, and cared for, not live in fear," professed Justice Tilakawardane.

The walk culminated in a street parade at which Sri Lanka's most prominent artists, musicians and dancers lent their talents to further enhance the important messages and celebratory atmosphere of the walk. Speaking about the success of the walk and the parade Justice Tilakawardane said, "It was as though everything that was positive, generous and kind about our people came together to create a special moment, when our hope and belief in humankind was reaffirmed. A strong force of hope and love that united us and bonded us together in a cause that is so important to us and our future generations."

