History, Technology And Innovation



As the President of J M WICKramarachchi, Mihira Wickramarachchi is a pioneer in the field of audiology and optometry. His commitment to uplifting the lives of the differently-abled and improving healthcare facilities in the country has borne fruit over the years, with the introduction of surgeries such as cochlear implants giving the gift of hearing to those previously labelled deaf. He continues to work towards changing the attitudes of society towards the differently-abled and empowering them to live normal lives. Reflecting on his achievements in healthcare and personal philosophies, he says that business should always be for the benefit of the community.

By Ayesha Inoon
Photography Damith Wickramasinghe

Tell us about the inception of your business. What inspired you to enter

the field of audiology?
When I first went into business I felt that I wanted to do something for the country. My brother was a naval architect who built the first fleet of ships for oil rigs in India. Due to this I had the opportunity of travelling around the world, especially in Europe. I studied audiology in Germany. I wanted to support the differently-abled and eliminate deafness in Sri Lanka. Today I am extremely happy about our achievements.

I believe in maintaining quality in business. When I started my business I followed German techniques and adhered to German standards. I started audiology at a time when it was not known to the country and actually not even a word in the dictionary. I know I am a pioneer in the world in audiology. I believe in doing things that are unique, where others have not ventured. I don't want to imitate anyone.

What are some of the milestones you have achieved in the field of audiology?
I introduced the cochlear implant surgery to Sri Lanka and created awareness about it throughout the country. I've trained surgeons here who are now renowned around the globe. I am proud of this and the otolaryngologist society has honoured me for my achievements.

We use the very latest methods and are leaders in South Asia in this field. We have introduced our technology in other countries such as Maldives, Bangladesh, Mauritius and Vietnam.

So deafness need not exist anymore. We don't need deaf schools in future and 'deaf' is not a word that should be in our vocabulary. Children who were previously labelled 'deaf' can be cured and integrated into the general school system. Many children and adults including those in the military have benefitted from this surgery and are now back to normal. I am also in the process of introducing the eye implant similar to the cochlear implant.

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People say I’m the father of the deaf and I’m sure that I’ve done a good thing for the country. Every businessman should do something for the country as part of their lives. Governments cannot bring up a country on their own, the economy should be undertaken by the business community.

The Wickramarachchi Institute of Speech and Hearing (WISH) has made great strides in the field of audiology in Sri Lanka, tell us about some of your achievements.

WISH has been conducting training programmes in the field of audiology for many years and is approved by the Sri Lanka Medical Council for audiology courses. We have 20 audiology centres located island-wide which conduct courses and provide services to the hearing impaired. We have conducted courses free of charge in the North and East and have passed out the first batch of students there. Our team of professionals is highly qualified and many of our employees have found work in other countries such as Australia due to their world class reputation. We are also members of the American Academy of Audiology, British Society of Audiology and a partner affiliated to the Alexander Graham Bell Association.

I’ve introduced many modern technologies and methodologies in this field to the country, for instance auditory verbal therapy from Canada. We have world renowned scientists who visit and conduct lectures for our team. I want to make Sri Lanka the audiology hub of South Asia.

Wickramarachchi has been very committed to healthcare and improving the quality of life for people with issues in speech and hearing. What are some of the steps you have taken in this regard?

I am an advocate for the rights of the differently-abled and I act as an advisor in Special Education to the Ministry of Education. Yet we often come across barriers in society among teachers and parents of other children who are not ready to accept these children. While we are very committed to integration and the Government is committed, society has yet to change. However, if corporate society puts their mind to it they can change this mindset. I personally have around eight differently-abled children under my wing. Each corporate should take responsibility for a few children.

Every child should be screened for hearing at birth. I have donated the equipment necessary for this to Lady Ridgeway Hospital. Even when hearing loss is identified at a later stage our doctors and our hospitals are very well equipped to treat it. If the community and the corporate society of the country commit to helping these children with hearing aids and cochlear implants we can not only improve their quality of life but also reduce the burden to the State of providing special education and facilities for them throughout their lives. My theme this year is research – this is what we lack. I am having discussions with German companies regarding technologies that will support the Government's efforts in healthcare.

Wickramarachchi has always focused on history, technology and innovation. We get contact lenses from Germany where contact lenses were invented and cochlear implants from Australia where they were invented. Now we want to invest in research that is suitable for our country.

How affordable are cochlear implants? Are there funds available to assist those who find it difficult to meet this expense?
Cochlear implants are quite expensive. Although it started out at 3.5 million rupees it has now come down to 1.5 million rupees. However, if you consider a person's lifespan for around 75 years this comes to only a few rupees per day. A hearing impairment would cost far more in terms of support for both the child and the family. Therefore it would be far better for the State or private sector to step in and help the child rather than spend on special education and other services.

I funded the first three cochlear implants in the country to encourage others to do so. I have also set up the WISH foundation to assist the needy in obtaining the care they need.

You have been innovative in the ventures you embark on and continue to expand and grow your businesses. How do you think companies can optimise the current opportunities for business in Sri Lanka?
This country is a virgin market for any businessman. This is a good time for anyone to get into business similar to 1977 after the open economy was introduced. However it must be business that is conducted in an honest and efficient manner. Quality and branding should be a priority. For instance, our latest concept is the

Wickramarachchi Glamorous Senses. This provides services for speech, hearing and sight through branded products. Sri Lanka can sell branded products at a lesser price than other South Asian countries due to our lower overheads and taxes.

Medical tourism is an area that we can work on. Hearing aids for example are much more affordable here than in the West. At Wickramarachchi we have a large team of professionals and we invest in very sophisticated equipment. Since our standards are so high we attract many foreign clients who come here every year or two to purchase our products. We should bring in concepts such as Wickramarachchi Glamorous Senses to other businesses for instance in dental medicine and cosmetic surgery. When people come on holiday they often prefer to incorporate their other needs such as these. By growing our health industry further we can earn a lot of foreign revenue. It is also important to encourage the establishment of private medical colleges and to have more healthcare workers – doctors, therapists and paramedics. Rather than sending our labour overseas we can train them as healthcare workers in hospitals.

Private-Government partnerships should be facilitated in the healthcare industry. For example, Government hospitals should outsource certain areas rather than invest in equipment such as MRI's. There should be private wards in Government hospitals and we should convert our old buildings into boutique hospitals and use the income for benefits for the needy.

We should also make it easy for large corporates to start business here. There should be laws implemented so that they can directly launch businesses here rather than through third parties. Free Trade Zones for specific countries should be implemented. Countries like Taiwan, China and Korea for instance are very attached to their own culture, food and lifestyle. By creating a similar atmosphere in Free Trade Zones we can encourage them to invest here and to stay. Our own corporates should also venture into business in other countries.

As A Positive Thinker I Always Think Of Tomorrow, Never Of Yesterday. I Believe In Nature And Honesty. In My Businesses I Always Consider Keeping Things Close To Nature.

What plans do you have for the future?
As a positive thinker I always think of tomorrow, never of yesterday. I believe in nature and honesty. In my businesses I always consider keeping things close to nature. For example I have a nature resort in Tangalle called Suwaya Villa. It is very unique, in beautiful natural surroundings and people enjoy coming there.

I am also interested in aviation and plan to start a domestic airline. Our country needs more of this kind of business especially after the launch of the Mattala International Airport. This is a great advancement in technology and jobs for our people and therefore this is a wonderful time to invest in a domestic airline.

I am also starting up businesses overseas in Thailand, New Zealand, Australia and the Maldives. I am looking into not just healthcare but many other areas. Every business is a source of enjoyment to me. The money comes later.

