

Professor Rachel Mathai (July 22, 1929–October 06, 2021)



Professor Rachel Mathai, our mentor, passed away on 6th October, 2021, leaving a huge void in the hearts of all who had the privilege of knowing her.

Professor Rachel Mathai was the daughter of Judge Jacob Eapen and Mrs Mary Eapen. She did her schooling in Kottayam, Kerala, where she excelled in academics and showed leadership qualities even then, as the ‘head girl’ of her school. In 1947, she was admitted to the prestigious Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore, where she trained under the visionary, Dr Ida Scudder. She obtained her MBBS degree from the Madras University in 1953. She joined the dermatology department in 1957, working with eminent dermatologists such as Dr Gass, Dr Klokke and Dr Bhaktaviziam and leprologists like Dr Cochrane and Dr Paul Brand. She went for further training to the United Kingdom. She obtained her MRCP from Glasgow in 1964 and FRCP in 1974.

Professor Rachel Mathai was the head of the department from 1976 to 1989. She showed an extraordinary dedication to her chosen specialty of dermatology, venereology and leprosy as an educator, clinician and “institution builder”. In order to start the postgraduate courses in CMC, she had to obtain an Indian qualification herself, so she enrolled for her Diploma in Dermatology in Madras Medical College in 1972. Due to her efforts, the Diploma (1979) and MD (1983) courses were started in CMC. Her students were among the first to appear for the National Board Examination in 1978. She excelled

as an academician, training and guiding postgraduates, who wear the badge of “trained by Dr Rachel Mathai” as one of their most prized possessions. Her method of training was unique, with emphasis on a “hands-on approach” with postgraduates being responsible for the overall management, which included treatment, investigations and counseling of patients in their care. She led by example; her empathy and dedication in patient care made her not only an excellent clinician but a wonderful and compassionate healer. She was instrumental in providing free care for leprosy patients in our institution. She was involved in research projects funded by both the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and CMC. She had a strong sense of ethics which she inculcated in her students. She has published many papers. These include the first study from India on direct immunofluorescence in cutaneous lupus erythematosus, the pathogenesis of drug-induced acneiform eruption, the diagnostic efficacy of nerve biopsies in leprosy, the efficacy of fixed duration multi-drug therapy (MDT) in paucibacillary leprosy, a landmark study on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) seropositivity among patients with sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and many more.

Her immense contribution to the Indian Association of Dermatologists, Venereologists and Leprologists (IADVL) has been recognized by her peers and the generations that followed. She was one of the pioneers of the IADVL, making it her mission to attend the annual meetings where she was always on the faculty delivering much sought-after lectures. Professor Rachel Mathai served as the editor of the Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology (IJDVL) from 1977 to 1983. Her dedication to the task was exemplary, spending long hours on the job and maintaining a high standard which her successors continue to uphold. She was President of the IADVL, Karnataka-Tamil Nadu (K.T.) Branch in 1983. The IADVL has acknowledged her contribution by bestowing numerous awards. These include the Ambady Oration, the IADVL Life Time Achievement Award and the Best Teacher Award [IADVL Tamil Nadu (TN) Branch, Tirunelveli-Tuticorin-Kanyakumari (TTK) chapter]. The

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IADVL, TN Branch instituted the Dr Rachel Mathai Oration in 2013.

Professor Mathai's skills extended beyond the portals of the dermatology department. She was an excellent administrator, and served as Vice-Principal, Medical Superintendent and Associate Director during her tenure in CMC.

She retired from CMC in 1989 after a long and fruitful career. Post retirement, she continued to work as a full-time dermatologist in Muthoot Hospital till 2015, a career spanning nearly 60 years.

A multifaceted personality, she excelled as a cook, was a gracious hostess, a humorous raconteur and was ready to shake a leg on stage. Above all, she was a wonderful and humane person, for whom no person was too small nor a task too big when help was required or requested.

Her husband, Professor KV Mathai (1926-2017), was one of India's finest neurosurgeons in his time. She is survived

by her daughter Susan, son Dr Varughese Mathai, and five grandchildren.

The Department of dermatology, venereology and leprosy (DVL), CMC, Vellore is indebted to Professor Rachel Mathai for the rich legacy of knowledge, ethics and values, and her immeasurable contribution to its establishment and growth, taking us to where we stand today. As we, her students, reconcile to our loss, our hearts are filled with gratitude for having had Professor Rachel Mathai as our mentor and for her influence on our lives.

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