



## Book review: Colombo Medical School at 150 - Celebrating our heritage

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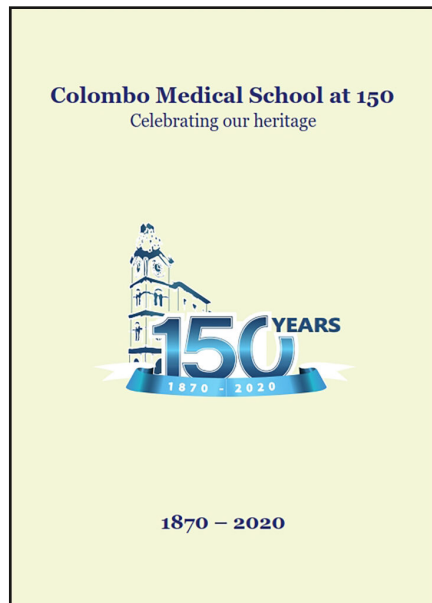
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The Colombo Medical School in Colombo, Sri Lanka is among the older ones in South Asia, having been established by the British in the year 1870. In 2020, the school celebrated 150 years of existence and a book titled 'Colombo medical school at 150' was published on the occasion. I was provided a copy of this book during my visit to Colombo as an invited expert for a medical humanities workshop. I started reading it and was attracted by the descriptions of the old days and the old photographs.

The first section consists of messages from

the Deans and reprints from old issues and magazines. The titles of the other sections are self-explanatory: Histories and stories from departments, More histories and stories, Reminiscences of students, Anniversary celebrations, and the list of people associated with the 150th anniversary celebrations. There are some old photographs in the book that take you back in time.

On the 1st of June 1870, 'an elementary school' named 'Colombo medical school' was established with three teachers, including Dr Loos as the Principal, and

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offering a three-year course. The history of the institution is well documented in the book. Urugoda CG writes, "The Colombo medical school was the first state sponsored institution for the teaching of western medicine in Sri Lanka. It had a long gestation period, beginning in 1830s and coming to fruition in 1870."

I was fortunate to meet Dr Fernando, one of the editors, during my trip to Colombo. Dr Fernando is the Head of Physiology, and she has created a museum in her department highlighting old instruments, charts and equipment. What a novel way to recreate the history of the department and of physiology! One of the old colonial buildings of the college was under renovation when I last visited.

Carlo Fonseka, the author of the chapter on 'The story of the Colombo medical school', writes, "As it happens, the Colombo Medical School owes its existence to the "prevalence of an obstinate and loathsome disease" in the Island in the 1860s which caused much misery and suffering in the natives and led to an alarming depopulation of the Wanniar districts." The author also mentions that "Speaking metaphorically, the Colombo Medical School was born, appropriately enough, in the Female Surgical Ward of the General Hospital of that time. If home is where one starts from, that ward must be regarded as the true home of the Colombo Medical School."

The school was among the first to establish a separate Department of Medical Humanities in the region and the chapter written by a good friend, Dr Saroj, along with Dr Santushi, makes for interesting reading. They write, "The seeds for the inception of this department were sown over several decades through informal and formal activities which stimulated interest in the Medical Humanities and emphasised its importance within medical education. Long before the introduction of Medical

Humanities as an academic discipline within the Faculty, there was some recognition of the value of the aesthetics for medical students through the establishment of an Arts Society in 1974."

The chapter on the Department of Medical Education is also interesting. The stories of the boy's and girl's hostels are well presented. Having stayed in a hostel during my undergraduate medical days, I empathize with the descriptions. As a clinical pharmacologist I found the chapter on the 'Department of Pharmacology' of special interest. Sri Lanka is a pioneer in essential medicines, rational use of medicines and access to medicines and healthcare in the region. These are areas dear to my heart and the contributions of the department and the school should be recognized.

The students' reminiscences start with Miss Verona who describes her experiences [during the period 1903-09] as one of the first female students to join the school. She writes, "Outside it (the lecture room) on the lawn, were lined up seniors in two lines. As I went past them trying to look unconcerned, there was subdued whistling and stamping, but no remarks were cast. I hastily entered the Lecture Hall, and took my seat in the front row, looking primly down at my desk, while the boys trooped in to occupy the back rows." The description of departments, exams and ceremonies during the olden days is engaging. There are also stories around the obnoxious custom of ragging.

There are descriptions of romances and the constant struggle to find quiet places in the vast campus. Sextus Corea writes about 'The medical school in the fifties' and mentions that "I felt that the unkindest cut of all was the demolition of the old "Heart Clinic" - the old C.M.A. Library - which served as a veritable Lovers' Paradise to many a medico couple. If only those old dusty cupboards (where have they gone?)

were to speak they would provide quite interesting and entertaining listening.” The memoirs of Dr Dinithi Fernando and of a colleague at IMU University, Dr Sameera, are illuminating. Dr. Dinithi writes about the late 1980s, “Our first two years in the Faculty were marred by frequent political instability, violence in the North and the South, student unrest and university closures that prolonged our undergraduate status by three years.” Having gone through a similar experience in Kerala, India, I could understand the author’s pain.

The faculty of medicine has completed a new tower where most of the departments are housed. The twenty-story building is well designed with an auditorium in the basement and a rooftop area for receptions and get togethers (see figures).

In South Asia we struggle with preserving and documenting our rich history. The Faculty of Medicine at the University of Colombo has documented important stages in their growth and development under resource-constrained settings. We have several institutions that are over a century old in the region, and documenting their fascinating history is important. Each

institution has made unique contributions to the region, to the country, and to science. This should be highlighted. In my opinion, the institutions should have a dedicated portion of their website devoted to their history. Today, recording audio and video is easier than ever and a curated collection could be maintained. Like the college in Colombo, other institutions can create printed and online volumes at important times in their history. The Faculty of Medicine at Colombo can create an online edition of this book and a dedicated area on their website can be devoted to the institution’s history. I wish other institutions are motivated to preserve and disseminate information on their history as well.

The book provides an excellent overview of the growth and development of one of the older (nineteenth-century) medical schools in South Asia and the oldest one in Sri Lanka. The English language editing and the production values are excellent. The book at present can only be ordered directly from the Colombo Medical Faculty Publishers, which some might find limiting. I expect the 200th anniversary book to be just as interesting, though, most probably, I may not be around to read it!



From left to right: Entrance to the new tower block of the faculty of medicine; View from the inner courtyard of the tower block; Excellent facilities inside the block; Inside view of the floors.  
Source: the author