

NBC FELICITATIONS

Dr Vasantha Muthuswamy

Dr Vasantha Muthuswamy looks like the quintessential senior government officer from south India. Her quiet demeanour belies her towering personality and achievements during her academic and professional career.

After schooling at the St Raphael's Girls' High School, Madras, Dr Vasantha completed her MBBS and her Diploma in Gynaecology and Obstetrics from RG Kar Medical College, Kolkata. She went on to obtain her MD in Obstetrics and Gynaecology from the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Madras, in 1979.

Immediately after her MD, she won an ICMR scholarship and joined the Council as Research Officer at the Toxaemia Research Unit, Vani Vilas Hospital, Bangalore. She moved to the Institute for Research in Reproduction, Mumbai, in 1980 and to the ICMR headquarters in New Delhi in 1982. She was responsible for the scientific, administrative and financial management of all projects and programmes funded by the two divisions, the Division of Basic Medical Sciences, Traditional Medicine and Bioethics, and the Division of Reproductive Health and Nutrition. She played a major role in the Council's activities in drug development. This work included traditional medicine, genetics and genomics; the ethics of animal and human experimentation; the promotion of research by medical students, and the development of various guidelines to facilitate research in the country.

When Dr Muthuswamy retired in 2009, as the Senior Deputy Director General and Chief of the Division of Basic Medical Sciences, Traditional Medicine and Bioethics, and the Division of Reproductive Health and Nutrition, of the Indian Council of Medical Research, she had put in 30 years of service.

A visiting fellowship at the Kennedy Institute for Ethics at Georgetown University, USA, in 1997, initiated her into the field of Bioethics; since then, she is acknowledged for her definitive contribution to the development of this subject in India.

Dr Muthuswamy is recognised internationally as the force behind the ICMR's "Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research on Human Subjects" in 2000, and then the revised version in 2006. The guidelines are a landmark document, in the country, for guidance on ethics review. She has also been instrumental in developing a number of other guidance documents. These include guidelines for animal experimentation, for stem cell research and therapy, for safety evaluation of food derived from genetically engineered plants, for biobanking, and for good clinical laboratory practices. She has also contributed to the development of research ethics guidelines for other countries, like Nepal and Sri Lanka, and for agencies such as the World Health Organization, the Joint United Nations Programme of HIV/AIDS, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, Family Health International and the HIV Prevention Trials Network. She has been involved in setting up national ethics committees in Lao PDR, Cambodia and the Maldives.

Dr Muthuswamy is a member of many national and international ethics committees. She is a founder member of the Forum for Ethics Review Committees in Asia Pacific. She was the Vice President of the Forum for Ethics Committees in India and has now taken over as the President.

Currently, Dr Muthuswamy continues her efforts at building capacity on bioethics, within the country, from her base in Chennai. She is the co-investigator for a Fogarty International Grant of the United States National Institutes of Health, on bioethics education in India. She is involved in developing a distance education programme through a collaboration between the ICMR and the Indira Gandhi National Open University.

As member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, she has been a sounding board for many of the emerging ideas within the journal.

Dr Muthuswamy is an untiring teacher. She has given more than 500 lectures on bioethics, and on drug development, including some on traditional medicines, on regulation, and on good clinical practice, across the length and breadth of the country in various medical colleges, research institutions, seminars and conferences, as part of her efforts to educate students and practitioners on bioethics. She has conducted many dozens of ethics workshops for different stakeholders within India, and in more than 25 countries across the world.

We who have had the honour of interacting with Dr Muthuswamy have always been amazed at her ability to speak on almost any topic in bioethics with erudition and enthusiasm. Few are aware of the fact that she has received many awards for her oratorical skills throughout her career.

Dr Muthuswamy exudes approachability in spite of the high offices that she has held. Young students do not hesitate even for a minute before approaching her. Nor do people with ethical problems think twice before writing to her for advice. Her no-nonsense approach to ethical dilemmas, her practical understanding of moral dilemmas and her complete faith in human nature in the midst of the cynicism that prevails in society, are what set her apart.

Dr Muthuswamy may have retired from government office but she has no intention of retiring from her life's work. Not only does she have more energy than her juniors when it comes to having fun -- as all of us have seen during various workshops on ethics -- she is also capable of running off to deliver a talk on a Sunday, when others prefer to take the day off.

On the occasion of the Third National Bioethics Conference of the *IJME*, we are honoured to felicitate Dr Vasantha Muthuswamy for her contribution to bioethics in India.

Mala Ramanathan