

Obituary

Solomon Victor 1938–2006

Donald Ross

The unexpected death of Solomon Victor has come as a great shock to his friends and acquaintances, at a stage when his surgical and cultural development and contributions were at an all-time high.

I have been aware of his progress and academic development over a number of years, extending from the time when he was learning the facts of surgical life with me at the National Heart Hospital, and throughout his subsequent exalted academic career. As well as his surgical and advanced cardiological degrees he was Winner of the Hallett prize, Hunterian Professor, Paul Harris Fellowship, Founding Editor of the Indian Journal of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, and President of the Association of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgeons of India. These countless awards and achievements were evidence of his intelligence, energy and leadership.

In 1970, he pioneered open-heart surgery at Madras, establishing the program at the Government General Hospital. Distressed by the plight of the poor, his humanitarian ideals led him to conceive and develop, in 1989, the Heart Institute as a non-government, not-for-profit charitable institute. Here, he practised KISS (Keep it Simple and Safe) principle and strove to make open-heart surgery accessible to more poor patients at minimal cost. The Institute was recognised by the Indian Government as a Centre for Specialty Training in Thoracic and Cardiovascular surgery.

During this intensive academic and surgical work he was at the same time fascinated by evolution. In fact he had a considerable interest in all life forms including terrestrial, aquatic and oceanic. He was continually influenced by his favourite conundrum—'Accident or Design?' that is, life resulting from some Grand Design, or a series of natural accidents and evolutionary development.

As evidence of his unselfish attitude to other workers in the field, he inaugurated the Donald Ross Museum in 1995 in Chennai. This study of the evolution, embryology and comparative anatomy of the heart valves of a number of different species has persisted. He and his assistant Dr. Vijaya Nayak have written copiously on this subject, including their interest in the origin of the heart's rhythms, which he concluded, was under central nervous system control.

Among his many other interests, Solomon Victor was particularly concerned with eradicating the scourge of

rheumatic fever in India. To this end, in 1989, he conceived the Rheumatic Heart Ailment Project, involving Rotary and the Corporation of Chennai. This concept essentially converted schools into primary health care centres, where the children, as well as undergoing a full education, were taught preventative health care. Notably, all children have individual health profiles and are monitored weekly by a doctor linked to the individual school, with treatment of minor illnesses at school and early identification and referral of major illnesses. Included in this basic scheme is a free noon meal which has eliminated many diseases, and been a boon for the poorest children.

Initiated in Chennai, in 2003 this program led to state-wide provision by the Government of Tamil Nadu. This impressive practical achievement of Solomon Victor's is an enduring and inspirational legacy.

In 1994, I made the following observation which now seems to be still more appropriate:

'Although the world is full of technically competent surgeons there are not many who have that drive which imbues them with the spirit of adventure and discovery, and a determination to broach new frontiers. Such a noble spirit was John Hunter, and following his footsteps is Solomon Victor, for whom surgery is an art rather than a craft, and whose total dedication is to the patient.'

This is respectfully dedicated to his wife, Dr. Suniti Solomon, who has pioneered prevention of and research relating to AIDS, and his son Dr. Sunil S. Solomon.



Dr. Solomon Victor (right) with Mr. Donald Ross in the Cardiac Museum in Chennai.

E-mail address: donross@bigpond.com.