



## Kumariah Balasubramaniam

Pharmacologist and activist for access to essential medicines. Born in Sandilipay, Sri Lanka, on Sept 12, 1926, he died in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on April 19, 2011, aged 84 years.

Kumariah Balasubramaniam was one of the world's most knowledgeable and resolute health activists. But his long and influential career could easily have been over before it even began. In 1947, while in his second year at the University of Ceylon Medical School, the 20-year-old Balasubramaniam contracted tuberculosis, a drug-resistant strain that could have killed him. That illness offered a lot of time for contemplation, notes his colleague Shila Kaur, Coordinator of Health Action International-Asia Pacific. "During his prolonged hospitalisation, he was constantly in touch with people from the poorer parts of society in Sri Lanka. That really made him see things differently. It really made him think that there needed to be more focus on accessible medication for the poor. That was one of the things that influenced his future career direction."

Only in 1952 was Balasubramaniam—known widely as Bala—declared free of the disease and allowed to recommence his studies. After graduating with high marks in pharmacology, he joined the Department of Pharmacology at the University of Colombo led by Seneka Bibile, who went on to found Sri Lanka's drug policy that has been used as a model internationally for the development of policies based on rational drug use. For Bala, Bibile was a personal role model and mentor. When Bibile moved to the University of Peradeniya a few years later, Bala moved with him. Then, in 1968, Bala travelled to the UK for 2 years to

undertake a Diploma in Clinical Pharmacology and a PhD. When he returned to Sri Lanka, he was the sole permanent member of the academic faculty in the department—Bibile having been appointed chair of the State Pharmaceuticals Corporation. "By this time, Seneka Bibile had introduced Bala to the social, economic, cultural and political dimensions of pharmaceuticals and health care delivery", the editor of the *Ceylon Medical Journal*, Colvin Gooneratne, wrote in 2009. "And so, Bala knew by then what he must do."

The rest of Bala's career was focused on promoting rational drug use, social justice, and equity in health care. He began in 1978, at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in Geneva, where he was part of an inter-agency task force working on the involvement of the pharmaceutical sector in low-income countries. After the task force submitted its report, Bala continued to work at the UN agency, helping develop policy documents to strengthen the drugs sectors in Ethiopia, Nepal, Cuba, the Philippines, and Tanzania. In 1981, he took part in a UN seminar on pharmaceuticals in Geneva. At that meeting, an organisation called Health Action International was born—a global network of non-profit groups representing the interests of consumers in drug policy and lobbying for increased access to essential medicines. "He was one of the people who inspired us to have a people's health movement", recalls Zafrullah Chowdhury, the driving force behind the formulation of Bangladesh's national drug policy in the early 1980s.

In the late 1980s, Bala took a position as adviser and coordinator at Health Action International Asia-Pacific (HAIAP), and relocated to Penang in Malaysia. There he began working for access to essential medicines lobbying for change. "He inspired thousands of people, made them understand what rational drug use is", said Chowdhury. "And told everybody it's not a one-time game. It needs persistent and continuous movement, persuasion of the government, and persuasion of the WHO. That is where really he made a tremendous contribution." According to Kaur, who began working with Bala in the 1980s, "The expertise and advice he gave in terms of national drug policy development in countries in the Asia-Pacific region was essential. His career with the NGO world was devoted towards ensuring that rational drug use and access to medications is something that would be a priority for the poor."

Bala consulted for WHO on many occasions, and received the Commonwealth Vice-Chancellors' Fellowship Award in 1994 and the Olle Hanson Award in 2006. His insights and advice were delivered softly, with gentleness and a generosity of spirit that inspired those who knew him. "There was never a day that went by without a generation of kindness on his part", says Kaur. "He really epitomised what a doctor should be." He is survived by his wife Kamala and their four sons.

Stephen Pincock