

Obituaries

R. V. WARDEKAR, 1913–1996

Dr R. V. Wardekar, an eminent leprologist and Founder-director of Gandhi Memorial Leprosy passed away on 1 August 1996 at the age of 83.

Dr Wardekar was born in Pune on 27 October 1913. He had his earlier education in Pune and Baroda and took his medical degree (MBBS) in Bombay in 1940. Subsequently he took a postgraduate degree (MD) in pathology, also at Bombay University. Dr Wardekar was one of the very few qualified pathologists with an MD degree at that time. He taught pathology for a brief period in Grant Medical College, Bombay and then set up a private pathology laboratory.

Dr Wardekar had a very lucrative private practice and he could have had the material pleasures and luxuries in that metropolitan city; but he was made of a different mettle. The professional success and monetary gain did not give him any satisfaction. His values had become quite different, and so one fine morning he took a bold decision. He closed down the laboratory, sold off his car and all other belongings, and left for Wardha, where Gandhi had his 'Ashram' in Sevagram, and where he found mental peace. Gandhi's personal physician, Dr Sushila Nayar, had started a small rural hospital in Sevagram. Dr Wardekar took over the supervision of the hospital and also the health work in the surrounding villages. His great innovation was the system of health insurance—the villages paid the small insurance premium in kind with produce and in return had subsidized or free medical aid.

When Gandhi died, a memorial trust was formed and a part of the funds collected was set apart for leprosy relief work, because Gandhi had a great compassion for leprosy sufferers. (In fact when Dr Cochrane met him and told him about the need to help the leprosy cause, Gandhi is said to have remarked, 'You are trying to convert the converted'.) A committee was formed to take up leprosy work and Dr Wardekar was made the Secretary. This led to the establishment of the Gandhi Memorial Leprosy Foundation (GMLF) at Wardha in 1951.

At that time, leprosy work consisted of caring for the victims of leprosy in leprosaries or asylums on purely humanitarian grounds. Dr Wardekar decided to give a new trend to the work of GMLF. He planned to control leprosy by chemotherapy, with the newly-available drug, dapsone. He also used a public health approach with workers going into the community, spreading proper information about leprosy, detecting all cases and treating them, thereby removing the source of infection, was the strategy he adopted. I had the privilege of joining Dr Wardekar at that stage and working with the new strategy. At first this type of work was not accepted and was much opposed by existing workers but soon the rationale and results proved its worth. The Government of India accepted the method as the national policy for leprosy control. It is now the strategy followed all over the world, and the credit of initiating it goes to Dr Wardekar.

Dr Wardekar took a major role in the national leprosy control programme of the Government as consultant and guide. The Gandhi Memorial Leprosy Foundation grew to

have great prominence under his direction. The training of paramedical workers was first started at GMLF. Special importance was given to health education and methods of health education were demonstrated. In later years, social science research was established in GMLF.

With the death of Dr Wardekar, India has lost a pioneer in the fight against leprosy. He is survived by his wife, also a medical doctor, who was his constant companion, putting up with any personal inconvenience to help him in the great task.

K. V. DESIKAN