



CAREERS

Role model: Sakkarai Ambalavanan

The consultant physician in respiratory medicine at Glan Clwyd Hospital, speaks to **Kathy Oxtoby** about the art of communication and supporting patients in difficult circumstances

Kathy Oxtoby

London, UK

“It gives me immense satisfaction to give people the time and attention they need,” says Sakkarai Ambalavanan. Regardless of the pressures of his role, he always tries to find calm in the chaos.

Ambalavanan’s role is many faceted. Around 60% of his time is spent in general medicine, the other 40% is devoted to respiratory medicine, where his specialist interests include lung cancer, pleural disorders, and advanced respiratory conditions.

He describes his work in lung cancer as “very exciting,” because physicians can now do more for patients with the condition. This is partly because of pharmacology, but also because of improvements in surgical and diagnostic techniques.

“There’s an exponential increase in treatment choices and that’s a significant motivation of mine,” he says. “As part of a team, I’m able to prolong life span and improve patients’ quality of life.”

His decision to enter medicine was inspired by his maternal grandfather who worked for the former British Indian Army during the 1940s as a licensed medical practitioner.

Born and raised in Chennai (formerly Madras) in southern India, where traditionally people’s surnames are their first names, he inherited his grandfather’s name. “My parents thought my name meant I would become a doctor—and that encouraged me to become one,” he says.

It wasn’t an easy choice—he recalls how in India 25 000 people were competing for a total of 2000 medical college places.

Training in a country with a large population, he was exposed to a large variety of clinical problems, which he feels enriched his experience.

In 1995 he moved to the UK for advanced medical training. He worked at 11 different hospitals and lived at 17 different addresses in England and Wales, experiencing different health systems and local communities.

In addition to his current roles he has delivered training to local and international medical graduates and medical students.

As a trainer he has adopted a mantra from one of his own trainers: always make time for trainees no matter how busy you are. “Treat them as equals, and remember you were them once too, and that eventually you will all be colleagues,” he says.

He is also inspired by his family—his father and mother who encouraged his career in medicine and his older brother, now a professor in oncology working in Atlanta in the US. “My father and mother had modest opportunities but ensured both their sons are working in leading roles in medicine across the globe,” he says.

Ambalavanan is making the most of his training to develop the next generation of lung cancer clinicians, as he envisages “an increasing demand for these doctors.”

His personal ambitions include developing clinical informatics, including how to deliver handovers to doctors and nurses electronically. He believes the digitisation of medical records is “a journey that’s going to happen, and I’d like to champion those changes.”

Ambalavanan will do this with the support of his colleagues and team at Glan Clwyd Hospital, who, he says, “continue to teach me and inspire me; I couldn’t do without them.” He’s also thankful for the support of his wife and son.

Nominated by Puskar Bura

“Dr Ambalavanan, a fine clinician with good leadership skills, served as a tutor for the Royal College of Physicians. I had the privilege of having him as my supervisor during my core medical trainee years. During those years, I was encouraged to join the local negotiating committee as well as the Welsh junior doctors’ committee. Peremptory, yet friendly and supportive, the confidence and integrity that he exudes is something I have tried to emulate over the years.”

Puskar Bura is a cardiology ST4 at Derriford hospital, Plymouth