

Remembering the Life and Legacy of Padma Bhushan Dr. Sengamedu Srinivasa Badrinath

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Figure 1: Padma Bhushan Dr. Sengamedu Srinivasa Badrinath

INTRODUCTION

The passing of Dr. Sengamedu Srinivasa Badrinath (Figure 1) (on November 21, 2023, marked the profound loss of an extraordinary educator, a true visionary, and a pioneer ophthalmologist who founded Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Vasanthi Iyengar, and their two sons, Ananth and Seshu Badrinath. His departure from this world leaves a void that can never be filled, but his remarkable contributions and the lives he touched will remain etched in our hearts and minds forever. Dr. Badrinath led an extraordinary life dedicated to service, visionary leadership, and the advancement of ophthalmology and training young ophthalmologists by establishing Sankara Nethralaya at Chennai (Figure 2). As a visionary ophthalmologist, he trained thousands of fellows in retinal surgery.^{1,2} As an educator, he selflessly imparted knowledge to numerous ophthalmologists

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(visited from India and various other countries) who would become renowned ophthalmologists/retinal specialists themselves. As a humanitarian, he treated all patients with dignity and compassion, regardless of social status or means.

Dr. Badrinath's life perfectly exemplifies *Live, Love, Learn, and Leave a Legacy*. His legacy challenges us to lead lives uplifted by optimism and oriented toward others' welfare. By overcoming obstacles, sharing knowledge generously, and serving humanity, we carry forward the ethos at the heart of Dr. Badrinath's monumental contributions to ophthalmology and society. He showed us the power of living benevolently, affirming that we uplift our shared human condition when we lift others.

We are fortunate to have met Dr. S.S. Badrinath a few times at Sankara Nethralaya and while working at the Centre for Ocular Therapeutics and Biodevices, Storm Eye Institute, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, USA. He visited the USA a few times and addressed the group "Friends of Sankara Nethralaya". While addressing a group of doctors and others in the USA, he shared the work done by Sankara Nethralaya and deeply inspired all participants to help and contribute to eliminating preventable blindness in India.

The Early Years: A Foundation of Excellence

Dr. Sengamedu Srinivasa Badrinath's remarkable journey began with humble origins, hailing from a remote place in Tamil Nadu, India. Born on February 24, 1940, in Triplicane, Chennai, he embarked on a path that would shape his life and revolutionize the field of ophthalmology. With an unwavering determination to make a difference, Dr. Badrinath's academic prowess was evident from an early age. His exceptional intellect and dedication propelled him to the top of his class at Madras Medical College, where he graduated with distinction in 1964. This early achievement foreshadowed the remarkable career that lay ahead.

Driven by his thirst for knowledge and desire to push the boundaries of his field, Dr. Badrinath embarked on his academic journey, starting with his internship and a year of internal medicine residency at Grasslands Hospital in New York, halfway across the world. Dr. Badrinath traveled to Manhattan in the late 1960s passionately and enthusiastically to pursue specialized training at the prestigious Manhattan Eye, Ear, and Throat Hospital, New York, USA. Amidst impeccable state-of-the-art facilities and world-renowned surgeons, he learned everything he could about his chosen specialty- retinal surgery. Though far from home, Dr. Badrinath remained grounded in his mission to gain expertise in ophthalmology to someday serve the visually impaired in India. His humble beginnings served not to limit his ambitions but to motivate his quest for excellence. Despite limited means, this early dedication to mastering ophthalmology would provide the foundation for his pioneering career in improving eye care for the underprivileged across India.

Dr. Badrinath sought a fellowship opportunity to further refine his expertise with Dr. Charles L. Schepens, widely regarded as the father of modern retinal surgery, at the Retina



Figure 2: Jagadguru Kanchi Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswathi Nethra Nilayam (JKCN) inspired Dr. Badrinath's that led him to establish Sankara Nethralaya at Chennai

Services of the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Working under the guidance of this esteemed pioneer in the field, Dr. Badrinath gained invaluable knowledge and skills that would shape his future contributions to ophthalmology. Driven by his unwavering commitment to excellence, Dr. Badrinath's dedication was acknowledged through his achievement of becoming a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Canada in 1969 and a diplomate of the American Board of Ophthalmology in 1970. These accolades were a testament to his exceptional skills and expertise in the field, setting the stage for his illustrious career.

After completing his ophthalmology studies and acquiring valuable experience in the United States, Dr. Badrinath returned to India in 1970. With the constant support from his wife, Dr. Vasanthi Iyengar, Dr. Badrinath embarked on building up his medical practice in Chennai and making further phenomenal contributions to eye care (Figure 3). He worked as an ophthalmology consultant for six years at the esteemed Voluntary Health Services institution. From 1970 to 1972, he practiced at H. M. Hospital in Chennai, and then from 1973 to 1978, he served as an ophthalmologist at Vijaya Hospital, further expanding his patient base. Eventually, he established a thriving private practice focused on ophthalmology and the emerging field of vitreoretinal surgery. Throughout this early stage of his career, Dr. Badrinath published over 60 papers in prestigious peer-reviewed journals, demonstrating his dedication to generating new knowledge, techniques, and advancements in the field of ophthalmology. These formative years laid the foundation for Dr. Badrinath's future pioneering achievements in Indian eye care.

The Genesis of Sankara Nethralaya at Chennai

Jagadguru Kanchi Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswathi Nethra Nilayam (JKCN) inspired Dr. S.S. Badrinath that led him to establish Sankara Nethralaya in collaboration with the spiritual headquarters of Sankara Math (Figure 2). This remarkable initiative took shape in 1978, when Dr. Badrinath, alongside a group of dedicated philanthropists, founded the Medical & Vision Research Foundations in Madras (now

Chennai). As a unit of the Medical Research Foundation, Sankara Nethralaya became a charitable, not-for-profit eye hospital.

What set Sankara Nethralaya apart was its commitment to inclusivity and impartiality. It became India's first eye hospital that welcomed individuals from all walks of life, regardless of socio-economic status, and provided affordable and excellent care. This revolutionary approach fostered a culture of compassionate healing, transforming the landscape of Indian healthcare across various dimensions, including clinical service, research innovation, and professional education. The Sankara Nethralaya institution was built to keep the patient at the center of all decisions. "This life is to help others," Dr. S.S. Badrinath often remarked, exemplifying his philosophy of purposeful living. Under the guidance of Dr. Badrinath's principles and unwavering perseverance, Sankara Nethralaya emerged as an enduring embodiment of care without compromise. It set a benchmark for accessible excellence in eye care, ensuring that every individual, whether rich or poor, could receive world-class treatment and compassionate care. Dr. Badrinath's pioneering medical feats and systemic reforms touched countless afflicted lives. Throughout an incredible journey fueled by service-oriented values imparted in youth, his enduring legacy continues to heal, teach, and push frontiers so that others may live free of distress.

The impact of Sankara Nethralaya extended beyond its immediate reach. By revolutionizing the approach to eye care and embracing inclusivity, Dr. Badrinath's visionary hospital became a beacon of hope and inspiration for the entire nation. It served as a testament to the power of combining medical expertise with compassion, ultimately raising the standards of eye care delivery in India. Under the exceptional leadership of Dr. Badrinath, Sankara Nethralaya flourished as a sanctuary of healthcare, providing affordable excellence regardless of patients' financial circumstances. It stood as a guiding light of hope for destitute villagers burdened by treatable blindness and offered solace to scientists tirelessly battling life-altering eye diseases. With its cutting-edge facilities and compassionate teams, the institution worked tirelessly to transform despair into joy.

At its core, Sankara Nethralaya empowered lives by treating various eye diseases and restoring vision, ultimately restoring livelihoods that would have otherwise been lost due to a lack of accessible, high-quality care. Dr. Badrinath's humanistic vision and servant leadership elevated the institution beyond being a mere ophthalmic powerhouse. It symbolized optimism for countless individuals shrouded in darkness, addressing their material and emotional needs and enabling them to look forward with renewed clarity.

Dr. Badrinath's unwavering dedication to innovation and quality propelled Sankara Nethralaya to become a global leader in eye care. Pioneering new ophthalmic technologies, such as the microkeratome for safer Lasik procedures and cost-effective intraocular lenses, transformed cataract surgeries and positively impacted the lives of millions in



Figure 3: Dr. Badrinath was supported by his wife Dr. Vasanthi. Sankar Nethralya, Chennai. He did pioneer work in Ophthalmology by introducing several cutting-edge ophthalmic technologies

India. However, it was not just about the technology; Sankara Nethralaya, guided by Dr. Badrinath's vision, became a place where people from diverse backgrounds united to overcome suffering and find solace. His enduring legacy is a foundation built on hope, compassion, and selfless dedication to eradicating needless blindness, leaving an indelible mark on the field of eye care. Dr. Badrinath's profound legacy at Sankara Nethralaya inspires future generations of ophthalmologists, vision scientists, and researchers, reminding them of the transformative potential in the pursuit of accessible excellence and compassionate healing.

Pioneering Research in Ophthalmology by Establishing Medical Research Foundation

Dr. Badrinath established the Medical Research Foundation at Sankara Nethralaya. This pioneering research hub became a nucleus for important research in ophthalmology that improved the lives of millions suffering from visual impairments. Aligned with Dr. Badrinath's vision, the center seamlessly blended scientific research with clinical practice. Under his astute guidance, luminaries like Dr. Lingam Gopal, Dr. J. Biswas, and many others collaborated at the foundation. Their efforts established India's premier ophthalmic research institution under Dr. Badrinath's leadership. Significant milestones included creating an ocular genetics lab with an automated DNA sequencer. The center achieved remarkable breakthroughs, gaining global recognition in prestigious scientific journals like Nature. Innovations in ophthalmic diagnostics, ocular micro-surgeries, and publishing the outcome of the complex vitreoretinal cases became a signature of the Medical Research Foundation. His influence fostered research excellence and deep empathy among the brilliant scientists he mentored, transforming the eye care landscape.

Dedicated Postgraduate Ophthalmology Institute for Training Ophthalmologists

In addition to the hospital and research center, Dr. Badrinath established renowned educational institutions to fulfill his

vision for Sankara Nethralaya. In 1985, he founded the Elite School of Optometry, which emerged as a premier institution for optometry education and research. The school focuses on academic excellence and the importance of service to the visually disadvantaged. Dr. Badrinath also created the Medical Research Foundation's Sankara Nethralaya Academy in 2010, an institution dedicated to providing specialized training and continuing education for healthcare professionals in the field of ophthalmology. The academy offered a wide range of programs, including specialized courses, workshops, and conferences, designed to enhance the knowledge and skills of ophthalmologists, optometrists, and other eye care professionals. Through its comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach, the Sankara Nethralaya Academy fostered a culture of continuous learning and professional development, ensuring that healthcare providers stayed at the forefront of advancements in eye care.

The Charitable Arm to Deliver Compassionate Eye Care to All

Dr. Badrinath's commitment extended beyond conventional medicine. He ardently believed that quality healthcare is a fundamental human right. To fulfill this vision, he established the Medical Research Foundation Trust within Sankara Nethralaya to deliver compassionate eye care to all. Dr. Badrinath and a team of devoted volunteers continuously raised money for patients who could not afford treatment to ensure no one went without essential care due to lack of means. Their charitable efforts provided a vital lifeline to numerous financially struggling individuals, enabling them to access medical care that would otherwise be out of reach. While the hospital offered subsidized treatment, he introduced mobile teleophthalmology units and eye surgery vans to provide accessible or affordable care in remote rural villages. Dr. Badrinath enabled Sankara Nethralaya to fully embody his vision as a sanctuary for any in need through the Medical Research Foundation Trust and outreach initiatives. It is a testament to his humanism, uplifting lives through compassion beyond medical excellence alone.

Dr. S.S. Badrinath was conferred the Life-Time Achievement Award by the Madras City Ophthalmological Association (Figure 4).

The Guiding Light for Next Generations: Dr. Badrinath's Legacy

Reflecting on the extraordinary life of Dr. S.S. Badrinath, we are moved by his profound humanitarian contributions to society and ophthalmology. His teachings were not merely words but an unwavering commitment to improving humanity. The Sankara Nethralaya revolutionized compassionate healthcare in India and set global benchmarks in clinical excellence and service to the underprivileged. His impact



Figure 4: Dr. S.S. Badrinath was conferred the Life-Time Achievement Award by the Madras City Ophthalmological Association

extends beyond Sankara Nethralaya's walls, inspiring medical institutions worldwide to emulate his ethical, egalitarian healthcare example. His vision sparked positive change in domains spanning education, community upliftment, and rural empowerment through the broader Sankara movement. But above all, Dr. Badrinath ignited a spark in the hearts and minds of almost everyone who came into his contact. He awakened our intrinsic humanity and compelled us to pursue lives of purpose through selfless service.

Dr. S.S. Badrinath's message to his students was about providing compassionate eye care to each and every patient. According to him, "one can cross the ocean of life only by performing selfless service to humanity." He was a real Karma Yogi. The departure of Dr. Badrinath is a big loss to the ophthalmic fraternity. Dr. Badrinath's passing should not be seen as the end of an era but as a promise for a generation of young ophthalmologists to become ophthalmic (as well as retinal) surgeons inspired by his example to seek to understand their patients and to unravel the causes of blindness, for which as yet there are no answers. Such souls are indeed immortal, and his teachings will live on through thousands of his fellows and students.

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