

OBITUARY

Dr. C. Gopalan (1918-2019)



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Coluthur Gopalan was born in Salem on October 29, 1918. He grew up in Madras and had a brilliant academic career, first at Christian College high School and then at Madras Medical College. He obtained his M.D. in General Medicine from Madras University in 1943.

The young Dr. Gopalan had been deeply moved by reports about the Bengal Famine of 1942. His focus shifted to nutrition research rather than clinical practice. He was awarded a Nuffield Foundation Scholarship in 1946, the first Indian to receive the award. He travelled to the U.K. where he completed his Ph.D in Nutrition at London in just two and a half years.

On his return, he was appointed in 1949 as Deputy Director of the Nutrition Research Laboratories (NRL), Coonoor. In 1959, the laboratory was moved to new and spacious premises at Hyderabad. Dr. Gopalan was appointed Director a few years later, and went on to build up NRL into a holistic research institution, with departments of biochemistry, statistics, etc. in addition to field study units. NRL grew in stature, attracted talented scientists and produced valuable research findings which gained national and international recognition. In 1969, it was named the National Institute of Nutrition.

In 1973, Dr. C. Gopalan was appointed Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). He strengthened the institutes under the council and set up new institutes to carry out research in leprosy and malaria. He also instituted a Talent Search Programme for young medical graduates who wished to take up a career in research. Many of these Talent Scholars later headed institutions under the ICMR and one also became its Director General.

In the early years, Dr. Gopalan's research into protein-calorie malnutrition created a new perspective among researchers. His studies in kwashiorkor and marasmus were path-breaking contributions. His papers on conditions caused by food toxins, particularly lathyrism, led to major policy changes by the Government of India. His studies on lactation and anemia in women and on stunting and wasting in children were noteworthy. In later years, the emerging trends towards overnutrition (overweight and obesity) alongside the older problem of undernutrition, drew his attention.

After Dr. Gopalan retired in 1978, he set up the Nutrition Foundation of India (NFI), a not-for-profit institution in New Delhi so as to continue with his life's work in nutrition research. NFI has been carrying on important studies in public health nutrition, particularly in women and children who represent the most vulnerable groups.

Dr. Gopalan was the recipient of several honours and awards. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS). He was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 2003. Apart from numerous other recognitions, he was a Fellow of all three Indian science academies and of several foreign ones as well. As recently as 2019, the Federation of Asian Nutrition Societies (FANS) awarded him a Living Legend Award. On October 16, 2019, two weeks after his demise, he received posthumously, a Lifetime Achievement Award for his contribution to India in the area of Public Health Nutrition and Nutrition Research by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. The Award was presented by the Hon'ble Health Minister, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, Dr. Harsh Vardhan, at the Indian Council of Medical Research Awards Function in New Delhi and received on his behalf by his son, Dr. Sarath Gopalan who is a practising Pediatric Gastroenterologist in New Delhi.

As researcher, mentor and institution builder, Dr. C. Gopalan made tremendous contributions to nutrition science in India. Above all, his tireless advocacy for giving nutrition a prime place in policy making at the national level has ensured that nutrition is recognized as the most important factor in the health of a nation and its people. He breathed his last on October 3, 2019 at the legendary age of 100 years.