Dr Dilip Mahalanabis

(12 November, 1934 – 16 October, 2022)

While oral rehydration solution (ORS) as a simple, effective remedy for dehydration is known around the world, Dr Dilip Mahalanabis, the man who pioneered the treatment is less famous, and passed away at a Kolkata hospital on October 16, 2022. The sad demise is a great loss to Indian pediatric fraternity, as well as to the children all over the developing world. His death marks the end of an era.

Born on November 12, 1934 in West Bengal, Dr Mahalanabis studied in Kolkata and London, and joined the Johns Hopkins University International Centre for Medical Research and Training in Kolkata in the 1960s, where he carried out research in oral rehydration therapy. Oral rehydration is still the mainstay of treatment for diarrheal diseases in children. Before the use of ORT, the only treatment was intravenous fluid infusion, which was neither cost-effective nor easy. Due to Dr Mahalanabis’s persistent efforts, ORT was made a household name.

From 1975 to 1979, Dr Mahalanabis worked in cholera control for the World Health Organization (WHO) in Afghanistan, Egypt and Yemen. During the 1980s, he worked as a WHO consultant on research on the management of bacterial diseases. In 1983, he was made a member of the WHO’s Diarrhoeal Diseases Control Programme. He remained in that role for over five years. He was also associated with Kolkata’s National Institute of Cholera and Enteric Diseases (NICED) and the Institute of Child Health.

In 2002, Dr Dilip Mahalanabis along with Dr Nathaniel F Pierce was awarded the Pollin Prize by Columbia University (considered the equivalent of Nobel in Pediatrics). Later, he also received the Prince Mahidol Award (2006).

His was a life full of compassion, dedication and true acts of generosity. Our pediatric fraternity mourns the loss of a great researcher and human being in every sense of the word. His exemplary dedication to child health and his zest to innovate to save lives in the battlefield makes him a true hero for mankind.