

M. Sarada Menon

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Abstract

Dr. M. Sarada Menon is the first woman psychiatrist in India internationally reputed Psychiatrist, and passionate about rehabilitation who held the post of Superintendent of the Institute of Mental Health, Chennai for over 18 years. She was the founder of SCARF (Schizophrenia Research Foundation). She was largely instrumental in getting the annual grant from the State Government and the land to construct the day care center. Dr. Sarada Menon stepped down from the post of Director in 1995, making way for Dr. Thara, the present Vice Chairman. She received many awards for her many outstanding works in the field of mental health. Padma Bhushan was awarded to Dr. Sarada Menon by the President of India in the year 1992.

Keywords: Sarada Menon, First woman psychiatrist, SCARF.

Introduction

Mambalikalathil Sarada Menon is a first Indian woman Psychiatrist, social worker and the founder of Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF), which is a Chennai based non-governmental organization working for the rehabilitation of people affected with Schizophrenia and other mental disorders. She is a former Madras Medical Service officer and the recipient of the third highest civilian honor in India, the Padma Bhushan, in 1992, for her contributions to society.¹

About her personal life

Sarada Menon was born in a Malayali family on 5 April 1923 as the youngest of eight children of her parents in Mangalore, Karnataka. Her father was a judge and when he was transferred to Chennai, young Sarada moved with him for her early schooling at Good Shepherd School and later at Christ Church Anglo – Indian Higher Secondary School after which she graduated from Women's Christian College.²

Medical career

She graduated in medicine from Madras Medical College in 1951. She did her residency at Irwin Hospital, New Delhi (which is now Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan Hospital) before joining Madras Medical Service in 1951 to start her career at Pittapuram Mission Hospital, Andhra Pradesh. She simultaneously studied for the post-graduate degree of MD which she obtained in 1957. Subsequently, she successfully completed the Diploma in Psychiatric Medicine, at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), thus becoming the first woman psychiatrist in India.²

Her role in the field of Psychiatry

As superintendent of IMH, Kilpauk (1961 – 1978)

Menon joined the Institute of Mental Health (then known as Government Mental Hospital) in Kilpauk in 1959 and superannuated from the institution in 1978. She became its first woman Superintendent in 1961. During her period

(1961–1978), several special clinics were started. Child Guidance Clinic started functioning under Dr. O. Somasundaram who got training in child psychiatry at the UK. Other special clinics which were started were neuropsychiatric clinic, geriatric clinic, epilepsy clinic, adolescent clinic, and neurosis clinic.³ During the initial period of Dr. M. Sarada Menon's tenure, there were around 14 medical officers apart from the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and resident medical officer. Only 3 of them were trained but others out of their experience were able to manage. Office administrative works were done by the Secretary and his officials. Psychologists, nursing staff, social workers, statistician, pharmacists, recreation therapist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, and teacher for children, medical record official, garden supervisor, photographer, dietician, kitchen staff, male attendants, female attendants and other staff members were also recruited. In 1961 the strength of the hospital rose to 2800 as against the sanctioned 1800.³ It was during her tenure, the institution started the department of psychiatry, opened an out-patient facility and established regional psychiatric centers at all the district hospitals in the state. Advancement in professional sphere was noticed after she took up the job of superintendent of the institute. She was responsible for beginning of the Medical Library. Many students of psychology, sociology and social worker received postings at the institute.³

Industrial therapy center in IMH

In 1970, under the supervision of Dr. M. Sarada Menon "Industrial Therapy Centre" was established after obtaining government permission with the help of philanthropists, and, Dr. M. Peter Fernandez was made as medical officer in charge. This was a non-profitable and therapy-oriented center. Its primary focus was on psychosocial rehabilitation. Eventually, the center was developed and has a soft toys manufacturing unit, wire bag unit, incense sticks unit, paper cover making unit, chalk piece making unit, soap preparing section, a flour mill for grinding the essential day to day of the kitchen of IMH, and a candle making section. There is

also a bakery unit that caters to the daily requirement of bread for the Mental Hospital, which also supplies biscuits, cakes, and other confectionaries to the hospital canteen.³

Founder of SCARF

In the year 1984, she gathered a few like – minded people and founded Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF), a non - profit non – governmental organization, for the rehabilitation of people afflicted with schizophrenia and other mental disorders.⁴ Over the years, SCARF has developed into a full – fledged research base and is one of the few Indian institutions recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a Collaborating Center for Mental Health Research and Training.⁵ The SCARF team is composed of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, rehabilitation personnel, administrative and supportive staff.⁶

Objectives of SCARF

1. Research into biological, social and psychological aspects of Schizophrenia.
2. Treatment and rehabilitation of people suffering from Schizophrenia and prevention / reduction of disability.
3. Community outreach programmes in urban slums and villages to offer treatment and improve awareness.
4. Educating the public about Schizophrenia, to create awareness and understanding, to facilitate early detection, and to eliminate social stigmatization.
5. Training programmes to various groups of workers on principles of detection and management of mental illnesses.
6. Lobbying extensively with the Government and other apex bodies for programmes for the mentally disabled.⁶

Red cross society and WFSAD

Dr. Menon also served as the Vice – President of Chennai chapter of the Red Cross Society and has been a member of the state government panel set up for proposing prison reforms.² She is also associated with the World Fellowship for Schizophrenia and Allied Disorders (WFSAD).⁷

List of Dr. Menon's Publications

1. Dermatoglyphic Fluctuating Asymmetry and Symmetry in Familial and Non Familial Schizophrenia.⁸
2. Folie a Deux of Capgras Quality — A Study of Two Cases.⁹
3. Myocardial infarction — Psychological Study.¹⁰
4. A Clinical Trial of Pimozide (R6238) in anxiety state.¹¹
5. Social and Clinical factors in the outcome of Schizophrenia.¹²
6. Cerebral Biopsy in Dementia.¹³
7. Clinical Trial of Thiothixene.¹⁴
8. Prochlorperazine in the Treatment of Chronic withdrawn Schizophrenics.¹⁵
9. The faces of depression.¹⁶
10. Social workers in a psychotherapeutic setting workshop on behavior modification held at Government Mental Hospital, Madras.¹⁷

Table 1: Awards received by Dr. Sarada Menon²

Awards received
Padma Bhushan Award from Govt. of India
Avvaiyar Award from Govt. of Tamilnadu
State Best Doctor Award from Govt. of Tamilnadu
Government of India Best Employer Award
International Association of Psycho - Social Rehabilitation Special Award
For the Sake of Honor Award from the Rotary Club

Conclusion

The contributions of Dr. Sarada Menon to the field of psychiatry are enormous. She laid foundation for the development of SCARF and also a recipient of many awards. Her contribution to IMH, Kilpauk during her tenure as a superintendent and her responsibility towards mental care is indeed worth noting. She is one of the psychiatrists in India who has set an example as a role model for young psychiatrists of this generation.

Acknowledgments

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

Nil.

Sources of funding

Nil.

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