

A portrait of an elderly woman with white hair, wearing a white and yellow saree with an orange border. She has a bindi on her forehead and is looking slightly upwards and to the right. The background is a plain, light grey color.

# A LIVING LEGEND

DR. V. SHANTA



# GODDESS OF CANCER-CARE

She is one of India's most respected doctors. At 92, many regard her as the original goddess of oncology. For 65 long years she has been at it, and her life and times are a reflection of the changing face of cancer-care in India.

# DR. V SHANTA

It was 5 pm, 5th July, 2005 at Cancer Institute (WIA), Chennai.

Her handset rang. A colleague handed it over with a “Madam, it’s from the Philippines.” She took the call, wondering who it was from.

“Doctor, this is Carmencita Abella,” said the voice from the other end. Abella was the President of the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation. “Congrats, madam. You have been chosen for this year’s Magsaysay Award.”

“I am honored, Abella. I am honored.”

“Doctor, please keep the information confidential until we announce it.”

“Sure, Abella.”

It was a pact Dr. Viswanathan Shanta would not maintain! She broke it, sharing the moment of glory with Dr. S Krishnamurthi, her friend and guide for 50 years. After all, she was being conferred what is widely recognized as Asia’s Nobel Prize.

“Wonderful! It will help us raise more funds,” said the founder-director of the Cancer Institute! Years ago, on his mother, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy’s bidding, Krishnamurthi had returned from the U.S. to work in India. Over the years, he emerged as the doyen of oncology.

Shanta explains his words: “We are on a ‘mission’ of service. For us, awards have meaning only if they can further our mission.” A few days later, the goddess of cancer-care was on a flight to the *Pearl of the Orient Seas* to receive her prize.

That year, on August 29, Hurricane Katrina made two landfalls as a category 3 hurricane, devastating much of the U.S. Gulf Coast, killing more than 1,836 people, and causing over \$125 billion in damage. Cancer mortality and cost is far more than this.

If there is one person who deserves the country’s highest civilian honor, the Bharat Ratna, it is Dr. Shanta. The 92-year-old oncologist still sees patients at the Cancer Institute (WIA) twice a week, where she is the chairman. At a time when Mammon worship is fashionable, the doctor has made great efforts in creating affordable quality cancer-care for all.

## EARLY DAYS

‘Genius’ runs in Shanta’s DNA. Maternal grandfather C S Iyyar worked with the British Railways as Deputy Accountant General, and dad R Chandrasekhar was an eminent educationist. Not just that. Shanta is the niece of the Nobel Prize-winning astrophysicist S Chandrasekhar. Legend has it that as a schoolboy, her uncle used to go to the beach and pray, ‘Oh God, may I be like Newton!’ She is also the grandniece of Nobel laureate and Bharat Ratna awardee Sir C V Raman. While Chandra was her maternal uncle, Raman was her maternal grandfather’s brother.



But it was a gynecologist, the first woman house surgeon in the Government Maternity Hospital, and social reformer, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who inspired Shanta. Of course, others had kindled the early interest. “When I was in the 8th standard, I told my mother that I wanted to be a doctor, and she was thrilled. She had herself aspired to be a nurse.” In 1954, Reddy would set up the Cancer Institute in memory of her sister, and Shanta would work there almost from day one.

But we are getting ahead of the story.

Shanta was born on March 11, 1927, in Chennai, into an Iyer family. That year, Alfred Hitchcock directed *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*. The movie laid out the structure for many of Hitchcock’s future films.

Shanta went to the National Girls High School (now P S Sivaswamy Higher Secondary School). It was a thatched center for learning and about 800 kids studied. At the strike of the morning bell, the students would line up in two rows and walk into the class, observing pin-drop silence. It was here that the later-day doctor learned the virtues of discipline and punctuality for which she would one day become famous.

During that adolescent period, a few women fuelled her medical aspirations. Like: every day, Principal Veal, an Irish lady, spoke to them on the need for honesty, and to be caring of others. It was so inspirational, that it rubbed off on the little girl. Later, Lady Dufferin, a medical professional attired in a smart uniform, impressed Shanta as being independent. There was Mom Bala. Theirs was a super-large family with 13 people: five siblings, maternal grandfather, parents, and mother’s four younger siblings. Bala’s eagle-like patience brought in Shanta a sense of culture, though with a difference. “My mother spent all her time taking care of others. I wanted to be independent, and have time of my own.” And finally, Dr. Muthulakshmi’s work swept the future-day oncologist off her feet.

Shanta did her Intermediate in 1943 from Presidency College and waited a year (underaged) to join Medicine. “The year I stayed home, I read a lot of books, as our house had a massive library.” Those were the cataclysmic years of the World War. Hitler was beginning to lose as the Allies invaded Germany. In India, most women sat back as housewives, while some took up teaching or nursing. Very few became doctors or lawyers. Shanta lived up to her plans, completing her



Dr Shanta with her family



Dr Shanta (Second row-5th from left) in final year MBBS

MBBS in 1949, her DGO in 1952, and her M.D. (Obstetrics & Gynecology) in 1955, all from the fabled Madras Medical College (MMC). Then ‘something’ happened at MMC.

The 185-year-old MMC counts social reformer Muthulakshmi Reddy, INA Captain Lakshmi Sehgal, and educationist Arcot L Mudaliar as its alumni. Also in their list are neurosurgeon B Ramamurthi, Sankara Nethralaya founder S S Badrinath, and psychiatrist Sarada Menon, to name just three.

Throughout her student days, Shanta was a nerd. With no close friends to call her own, no hobbies, and no interest in sports, she wasn’t, by her personal account, sociable. At



Playing the Thambura

college, where she was one among 10 girls in a class of 100, she did not move much even with her women colleagues, leave alone the men. Shanta did only three things: read, read, and read. She read Gray’s Anatomy, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Bernard Shaw! Once the venereology prof, Dr. R V Rajam, caught her reading Bernard Shaw’s *The Doctor’s Dilemma*. He said, “It’s too early for you to be reading it!” The book is about the moral dilemmas created by limited medical resources and the conflicts between the demands of medicine as a business and a vocation.

Several professors made a profound impact on the young lady. Even at this distance, almost 70 years later, she recalls that physics professor Veeraraghavan and anatomy professor Mudaliar commanded pin-drop silence in the class. “Dr. Ananthanarayana Iyer mesmerized embryology students with lovely stories that helped you easily remember the points. Dr. Mohan Rao taught ‘bedside’ manners with elan. In his clinical

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Cancer happens when old cells refuse to die and start forming new, abnormal cells in the body. These extra cells may form a mass of tissue called a tumor.

classes, Dr. Venugopal sprinkled wisdom by drawing references from classical literature.”

How did a gynecologist gravitate into oncology? It’s a story worth telling.

In 1950, her first posting as a house surgeon was in the newly-opened cancer ward. There she met Dr. S Krishnamurthi. “I was impressed by the way he handled patients. Getting to know his values, principles, and knowledge of medicine influenced my decision to switch.”

Five years later, in 1955, soon after she finished M.D., she let go of the opportunity to work in the Government Maternity Hospital and instead joined Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy and Dr. Krishnamurthi. The mother-son duo had just started the Cancer Institute, which in modern parlance, was a startup. Shanta risked her everything and moved into the campus as a resident medical officer. She has been there ever since, and over the next 65 years, transformed the 12-bed hospital into a behemoth. Now with 535 beds, 100,000 annual visitors, and concessional fee for sixty percent of the patients, the Institute has metamorphosed into the go-to place for cancer-care. “It was a conjunction of stars that brought us together.”

In 1957, Shanta formally trained in oncology in Toronto and, in 1958, studied bone marrow transplantation in the U.K.

## SENSATIONAL SHANTA

Dr. Shanta believes that up to a point, cancer can be prevented, and if its onset is detected early, it can be cured. We ask her what causes cancer.

The factors that cause cancer are both internal and external. The internal factor is genes, aka heredity, while the external factor is ‘lifestyle,’ as in how we lead our life. Under lifestyle, the doctor names three: habits, food, and hygiene. She says, “Avoid tobacco. Tobacco with alcohol increases the risk of cancer. Avoid even passive smoking. Dental hygiene is essential. Wash your mouth after food, after drinking caffeine, and before going to bed. Sexual Health is critical. *Multiple partners* is risky. Be careful with high-fat and high-cholesterol diet and a sedentary lifestyle. Finally, as one ages, just like the bones get brittle, the probability of cancer increases, irrespective of lifestyle. Avoid external factors, and it reduces the chances of cancer.”

There was a time when cancer patients had no hope. But because of advancements in science and technology, it is now possible to cure many of them. Scores of people treated at the Institute have lived a healthy life for more than 20 years after treatment! That’s amazing if you consider that the survival rate in the 1950s was abysmally low. Today, prevention



With Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy and Dr. Krishnamurthi



With Pandit Nehru



Padma Bhushan Award (2006)



Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service (2005)



Padma Vibhushan Award (2016)



Avvaiyar Award by Tamil Nadu Government (2013)

# DR. V SHANTA

# THE CANCER INSTITUTE



Born

1927

Joined MBBS

1944

Finishes DGO

1952

Finishes MD (in Obstetrics & Gynecology)

1955

Installed Asia's first Cobalt Teletherapy Unit

1957

Pediatric Oncology Centre established

1960

Mammography to diagnose occult breast tumors

1965

Import chemotherapy drugs without customs duty.

1971

1943

Finished Intermediate

1949

Becomes a doctor

1954

Muthulakshmi Reddy establishes the Cancer Institute

1956

Combined modality approach for treating oral cancer

1958

1961

Received the first Indian-built X-ray Therapy Stimulator

1969

Regional Cancer Research and Treatment Center established

1974



Pandit Nehru laid the foundation stone



Established the department of Nuclear Medical Oncology

Concessional train travel for cancer patients.

First rural field survey of cancer in India.

Prime Minister Nehru open the McConnell Radiation





Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service



ICTACADEMY India Icon Award

Shanta is Hon. Executive Chairman.

IARC Award – Work for development of Registries in India.

India's first hereditary cancer clinic opened

Avvaiyar Award by TN Govt.

D.Sc. Dr. NTR University

D.Sc. Sathyabama University

Bought Linear Accelerator

Shanta is the new Director

Started hyperthermia. Added a postgraduate college

Started intra-operative electron therapy.

1976

1980

1984

1992

1997

2000

2005

2013

2020

1978

1982

1986

1995

1998

2002

2006

2016

Hyperbaric oxygen therapy started

Padma Shri



D.Sc. Shri Venkateswara University – Contributions in the field of Medicine.

Padma Bhushan



College of Oncological Sciences offers super specialty degrees.

Brachytherapy unit for cancer treatment

D.Sc Tamil Nadu Dr. MGR Medical University

Nazli Gad-El-Mawla Award for outstanding contribution to cancer control.

Padma Vibhushan



## IN A FRAME

**Age:** 92

**Father:** Viswanathan

**Mother:** Bala

**Birth:** 11 March 1927

### ALUMNUS

National Girls High School (1931-42)

Presidency College (1942-43)

Madras Medical College (1944-55)

### POSITIONS HELD

Currently Chairman, Cancer Institute (WIA)

*[She has been at the Institute since 1954]*

### INSPIRATIONS

Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy

Dr S Krishnamurthi (Her mentor)



### OTHERS

**Food:**

Breakfast: Buttermilk and plantains. Lunch: Idly or Upma. Plenty of vegetables and fresh fruit. Dinner: Soup.

**Love:** Ice creams

**Book:**

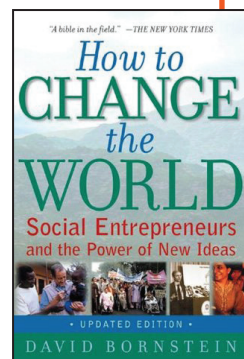
How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas by David Bornstein

**Currently reading:**

1001 days that shaped the world by Peter Furtado

**Favorite movie:**

Gone with the wind.





## THREE MESSAGE TO DOCTORS

1

Participate in areas where there is social injustice in healthcare. Express your opinion without fear where corruption exists.

2

Ensure that technological advances are used not because they are available, but because they add value and are cost-effective.

3

Treat patients as individual human beings, not as in a disease state. And do so with compassion.

is possible, and we can diagnose both pre-cancer and early cancer. Pre-cancer is 100 percent curable, and 60 percent of cancers can be prevented by organised health-care. “We are happy that over the 60 years, there has been a gradual change, and more people are coming in early.”

Globally there are several success stories. Cricketer Yuvraj Singh, actor Manisha Koirala, athlete Lance Armstrong, and movie director Robert De Niro all bested the killer disease. At the Cancer Institute, there have been many winners.

In 1987, a 20-something research scholar at IIT-Madras was diagnosed with blood cancer. With the newly available drugs, she was entirely cured. In 1992, she went to England for higher studies. There she completed her program, married a colleague, and is now settled in the U.S.

Here’s an account by another cancer survivor Ramamani, a CA, and lawyer, who speaks high of Dr. Shanta.

“The honor of knowing her, witnessing her total dedication, and the magic of her positive touch were blessings in disguise. Without a doubt, getting diagnosis and treatment were critical requirements, but what made the difference are the doctor’s words instilling confidence.” Perhaps like the movie 50/50, which tells the poignant story of a young cancer patient, played by Joseph Gordon-

Levitt, and focuses on the power of a positive mindset.

“Being a mother of a person with special needs, my worry while starting my treatment was if I had to keep away from taking him to various therapies. All Dr. Shanta said was ‘carry on with all your activities.’ A week after the surgery, when I asked her when I could drive the car, she said, ‘right now, you could drive back home.’ While it took two to three months to move my hand, the one thought that made me ignore the pain was that the Doctor has said I could drive. So I can, and I will.

“Cure does not happen by medicines or procedures. It also has to do with the confidence given by the doctor. If Dr. Shanta had said it would take some time, which she would have definitely known, I would have lived in the constant doubt whether I would at all get back to regular life. Twenty-two years after treatment, I say, ‘It is not how long we live but the quality of life that matters most.’”

It reminds you of R K Narayan’s short story *The Doctor’s Word*.

Ramamani adds, “The doctor-patient conversation is a prayer of a different form. The doctor gives her total dedication to the

DID YOU KNOW?

Pediatric cancers, once considered incurable, can now be successfully treated. Over 65 percent of these kids ultimately go through a normal longevity.

patient, and the patient surrenders to the doctor, with implicit trust. Creating an institution and imbibing these outstanding qualities in the team are no simple things.”

Adman R V Rajan, who lost his wife to cancer, says, “People go to the Cancer Institute not because it’s less expensive. They go there because they are assured the hospital will provide top-class diagnostic facilities and focused treatment, irrespective of your economic status.” For instance,

the tests conducted on his wife proved that her ailment was terminal. The doctors told him that they were not in favor of high-priced injections because the effort would be futile. So they put her only on palliative treatment to keep her comfortable. “How many hospitals do this?” Rajan, now an ardent admirer of the Institute’s work ethos, asks.

At the center, patients are asked about symptoms and a host of personal and family details. This then goes into a Demographic Registry of the disease that is a treasure trove for research. It keeps detailed patient records, with a systematic follow-up mechanism.

Dr. Rajyalakshmi Ram, now a doctor in Nigeria, credits her professional success to Dr. Shanta with whom she worked several years ago. “The most important thing I learned from Madam is discipline and her ability to be kind to patients despite their persistent questions. Thanks to her, every doctor, matron, nurse, lab assistant, and cleaner swore by routine. Under her care, the Cancer Institute has become a banyan tree giving protection to millions.

“At a time when no significant external aids were available, she made surgery a fine art.”

## CHANGING TIMES

A lot has flown down the oncology river in the last seven decades since Dr. Shanta went to the medical school.

Earlier, if you had cancer, you could kiss your life goodbye. No longer is it so. Science and technology have improved the survival rate. Yet, there a few uncomfortable things happening in what was once seen as the profession of God. ‘God’ is now a businessman, albeit a well-meaning one. Profit, rather than service, is driving hospitals. The patient is at times reduced to a commodity.

Dr Shanta says, “Every patient does not get whatever is available.” Money decides who will get what form of treatment. And that’s sad. Also, medicine was once an art: of listening, showing compassion, and being humane. With technology, the art of listening is gone.

Has the Cancer Institute stayed true to its mission of service and commitment to patients? “Of course. Only those who can afford have to pay,” says Dr. Shanta. The hospital takes a call on who will pay; after all, an institution cannot give free treatment to all. “Sixty percent of our patients receive either free or concessional treatment. Only forty percent pay. There is a free follow up for a lifetime. And unmindful of whether someone pays or not, the treatment is the same. We will never turn down a patient for lack of money.”

Let’s dip into history to narrate the story of the hospital.

The Women’s Indian Association (WIA) Cancer Relief Fund, under the lead of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, established the Cancer Institute. A well-known gynecologist, Muthulakshmi was a social reformer and in 1927, became globally the first woman to preside over a legislative body. In 1952, the

DID YOU KNOW?

When we absorb technology we must do a cost-benefit analysis, and see if it helps patients. Proton, an advanced technology, is surely useful in some instances but is not a panacea. It’s good to have it, but we can do without it. Chemotherapy, however, is a must.

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UNLESS THE WORK YOU DO HELPS THE COMMUNITY, THE WORK IS WORTHLESS.

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## IN CONVERSATION

### WHAT DO YOU EXPECT FROM YOUR DOCTORS?

Doctors have to be honest and transparent as the patient trusts you. While over treatment is unethical, if I cannot save a patient, spending on the patient is a drain on the economy, irrespective of who pays. But where cure is possible, our motto is that money shall not come in the way.

### WHEN I THINK OF CANCER, I THINK OF DR. SHANTA.

(Embarrassed.) I have been fortunate to be recognized. Many others also do exceptional work. I take my recognition as God's will.

### DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?

Not in the sense of going to temples. But I do believe that there is someone beyond us. Stephen Hawking made a case for 'there's no God; no one directs our fate,' in his book 'Brief Answers to the Big Questions.' But I disagree. There is undoubtedly some force organizing life.

### WHAT ARE AWARENESS CAMPS?

An 'organized population screening' involves registering the population in a particular village. Community workers visit all houses and inform them about the need and availability of early cancer detection. All women who come to the detection camp are examined. If they are detected having cancer, the Cancer Institute (WIA) gives them free treatment.

government donated the land on which the Cancer Institute is housed. Earlier, in 1947, the year of India's independence, her son Krishnamurthi left for the U.S. to specialize in cancer-care. He returned on her bidding to support her dreams.

When Dr. Shanta joined the Cancer Institute, medical oncology did not exist. Cancer treatment was done by general surgeons and physicians. The place had only two doctors: Krishnamurthi, who was trained in surgery and tumor pathology, and Shanta. "Between us, we managed everything: surgery, radiotherapy, and pathology. Medical oncology and chemotherapy came years later, around 1970." The Institute was a one-story building with an outpatient department, an office, the radiotherapy and diagnostic rooms, a dispensary, and a store. "One of the rooms was converted into an operating theater. Two nurses and one technician made up the team. I did rounds, dressed patients, and wrote case records," said Dr. Shanta. For a long time, I was nurse, technician, and doctor.

Over the years, at the Institute, Dr. Shanta set up India's first comprehensive

**DID YOU KNOW?**

In the 1960s, general surgeons and physicians treated cancer. Some of them were saying, "Cancer cannot be cured." This was a negative approach when extraordinary changes were happening the world over. Dr. Krishnamurthi and Dr. Shanta felt there was a need for creating a specialty for cancer treatment. This introduced the concept of oncology and the foundation of the first college of Oncological Sciences in India. To get this approval from MCI took them 10 years of pilgrimage to Delhi.

pediatric cancer clinic, conducted the country's first significant cancer survey, and developed its first program for early detection of cancer in rural areas. This was at Kanchipuram. She also carried out India's first successful trials of combination therapy, and laid the foundation for multimodal treatment in oral cancer.

Not surprisingly, the bold lady is called 'Chairman.'

Today, the Cancer Institute comprises a 535-bed hospital and research center plus the Dr. Muthulakshmi College of Oncological Sciences, with advanced specialties in medical, surgical, and radiation oncology. At a time when medical care has become commercial, Dr. Shanta has ensured the Institute stayed true to its culture, "Service to all." Its services are free or subsidized for 60 percent of its patients. Treatment protocols are the same for both paying and nonpaying patients. No one is sent back for want of money.

## INTO THE FUTURE

Money is the oxygen that helps run a hospital. With its Spartan pricing, the Cancer Institute needs a war chest, and that isn't happening in a hurry. Well, the community did donate liberally, egged by the Institute's essential social-mindedness. Earlier, money also came from international organizations, but these are slowly drying up. The government is no longer a prominent donor. Luckily the corporates are putting in money. To sustain you need more money because viability is linked to cash.

Also, medical talent with a service orientation is sparse. So you need deep pockets to attract and pay top-class talent. Further, with advances in the field of medicine, you have to stay state-of-the-art and invest in research. "We need people like the Rockefeller Foundation. I hope we can work like the Mayo Clinic in the U.S.," says Dr. Shanta. The Mayo Clinic provides affordable yet world-class healthcare, thanks

to the munificence of the Mayo brothers. For the Cancer Institute, the coffers have to be filled by governments, corporations, and collaborations. Maybe the Azim Premji Foundation is listening?

Dr. Shanta feels that awareness levels have to still improve. Even today, many are not aware that cervical cancer is curable if detected early. Different cancers have different origins and are to be treated differently. No two cancers are alike. A brain tumor is different from oral cancer. It is this heterogeneity that make understanding of cancer tough.

Talking about the status of cancer treatment, Dr. Shanta says, “India has achieved near global standards, and the therapeutic facilities are world-class.” And then adds: “I firmly believe that treatment must be equitable for all patients, rich or poor. Unfortunately, the corporatization of hospitals has changed the ethos.”

Today, treatment options for all cancers are satisfactory. Incurable tumors are now healable. For example, 80 percent of Hodgkin’s disease and 60 percent of leukemia can be cured. Organ conservation is possible in bone tumors, limbs can be restored, and amputation avoided.

According to Dr. Shanta, three things are essential for the future. First is the need to detect cancer early. That’s half the battle won. There should be a network of early detection centers. We must ensure that the benefits of research reach everyone irrespective of social and economic status. More insurance for cancer is needed. We must make healthcare affordable, must help palliative care, and accelerate research practices to keep up with the latest advances, as these are tomorrow’s treatment.

So, what does the legendary doctor do these days?

I read *The Hindu* every morning, and do crossword to keep my memory sharp. Every Monday and Thursday I go to the hospital to see patients.

Cancer is a complex biologic phenomenon. It is not one disease but is a generic name for a broad spectrum of conditions, biologically different. Also, the treatment is increasingly getting personalized. In the end, one can just be philosophical and say, “In one’s life, there will be many ups and downs, and cancer is just one among them.”

Like tuberculosis, will we be able to eradicate cancer, we ask. “Not possible,” says Dr. Shanta. “The day it happens, 1.3 billion will celebrate the year. They would even forget 1947. How beautiful life will be,” remarks Dr. (Mrs.) Ram.

Dr. Shanta administers the Cancer Institute with the same vigor, values, and vision as she did when she embarked on her career 65 years ago. She has a motivated-team helping in the struggle. She believes there is a long-distance still to walk as they have merely scratched the surface. “Until we find the cause for cancer and until we find a cure for everyone, our work is not over.”

The words of Robert Frost come to my mind:

“The woods are lovely, dark, and deep;  
but I have promises to keep;  
and miles to go before I sleep;  
and miles to go before I sleep.” ▶



Cancer can strike anybody. It struck Ramana Maharshi and it also struck Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

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