

News

A baby girl would live on in the lives that will be saved

By Kumudini Hettiarachchi

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Medical students Akhila Nilaweera and Mohammed Nazik (from left) present the cheque, through baby Sonakshi's parents Shalika and Mahesh, to Prof. Rohan Siriwardana of the Colombo North Centre for Liver Diseases (CNCLD). Pix by M.A. Pushpa Kumara

Two Colombo University medical students' initiative to collect funds to save 2½-month-old Sonakshi suffering from end-stage liver failure by sending her to India may have come too late for her, but the donation of the collected money to the Colombo North Centre for Liver Diseases will help save other little lives as moves are underway to begin transplants in younger children shortly

Hope, despair and hope rises once more from deep sorrow. This is the tragic circle that a humble farming couple from Horowpothana has endured in the last few months.

While Mahesh Lakmal Susantha (35) looks on in dejected silence, the tears flow for Shalika Lakmali Somaratne (33). Happiness, contentment and hope were theirs, when into their lives came Sonakshi, their tiny baby girl on January 25.

Not for long though. Soon after baby and mother went home, the little one's eyes turned yellow and her faeces white. The worries and tests began and 2½-month-old Sonakshi was transferred to the Lady Ridgeway Hospital (LRH) for Children, Colombo, to have a camera inserted into her tiny tummy to find out what was wrong.

"Dye ekak daala beluwa (they sent a dye)," says Shalika. An operation followed, with the distraught parents being gently told that Sonakshi's piththashaya was blocked.

The baby in end-stage liver failure was critically ill. The ducts (tubes) that carry bile from the liver to the gallbladder were blocked as she was suffering from biliary atresia.



Prof. Janaki Hewavisenthi hands over a token of appreciation to medical students Akhila Nilaweera and Mohammed Nazik while Prof. Vajira H.W. Dissanayake, Prof. Shaman Rajindrajith and Sonakshi's parents look on.

The baby was under the care of Prof. Shaman Rajindrajith in the LRH Professorial Unit and a concerted effort by the surgical team to perform the Kasai procedure proved futile. This procedure involves the removal of the blocked bile ducts and gallbladder, replacing them with a segment of the child's own small intestine, to act as a new extra-hepatic bile duct system.

Sonakshi needed a liver transplant and so far Sri Lanka has not performed a transplant in such a tiny baby.

However, paediatric liver transplants for older children have been initiated by the Colombo North Centre for Liver Diseases (CNCLD) which comes under the umbrella of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya and the Colombo North (Ragama) Teaching Hospital. The CNCLD is to embark on transplants in younger children shortly.

The first-ever successful paediatric transplant in Sri Lanka was performed on July 14, last year (2020), on nine-year-old S. Kishanu from Jaffna. Suffering from 'chronic' liver disease probably due to metabolic liver disease, Kishanu was pulled back from the brink of death by the transplantation of part of her mother S. Rasika's liver. (*The Sunday Times* exclusively reported this trailblazing event in an article headlined 'Child liver transplant, a medical first' on July 26, 2020.)

Then, just last month, the CNCLD performed the first successful paediatric liver transplant for acute liver failure on six-year-old Diluni Ahinsa from Kirindivela, Gampaha on September 22. (*The Sunday Times* once again exclusively reported this feat headlined 'Pioneering step in little girl's battle between life and death on October 10.')

The only option for Sonakshi's parents, however, because she was tiny was to take their baby to India at huge cost but they just did not have the wherewithal to do so.

It was while Shalika and Sonakshi were at the LRH that final-year students of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Akhila Nilaweera and Mohammed Nazik attended to them during their professional appointment. Final-year medics do a rotation of the major specialities such as medicine, surgery, obstetrics & gynaecology, paediatrics and psychiatry.

Right in front of their eyes was a humane issue. Even though numerous parents left with babies who had been cured of their illness, this was different. Moved by the plight of the hapless parents who were distraught at their inability to take Sonakshi to India, the medical students decided to extend a helping hand.

Amidst their tough studies and ward work which had become so much harder with the challenges of COVID-19, they networked to collect funds to send baby Sonakshi to India for the life-saving operation.

Tapping social media, after obtaining all the relevant approvals, they did raise Rs. 4.3 million but for Sonakshi it was too late. The baby had died on August 14, a week before the parents were to take her to India. For the parents it was hope and then despair.



The team of the Colombo North Centre for Liver Diseases (from left) Dr. Suchintha Tillakaratne, Dr. Nishani Jayatunga, Dr. Chinthaka Appahamy, Dr. Aruna Weerasooriya, Prof. Madunil Niriella, Prof. Janaki Hewavisenthi (Dean), Dr. Merantha Fernando, Dr. Bhaagya Gunetilleke, Prof. Rohan Siriwardana and Prof. Anuradha Dassanayake

It was then that Akhila and Nazik looked around and found that a member of the CNCLD team had in fact ventured into liver transplants in older children.

And so the 'inaugural' donation to the 'REVIVE Liver Fund', with its motto of 'Join Hands to Save Lives' came from one Faculty of Medicine to another.

A cheque for Rs. 3 million was handed over to the CNCLD in the presence of a small group which included Prof. Janaki Hewavisenthi, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya; Prof. Vajira H.W. Dissanayake, Dean, & Prof. Shaman Rajindrajith, Professor of Paediatrics, of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo; and the CNCLD team. (The other Rs. 1.3 million had been donated earlier to the parents of another infant who needed a liver transplant in India.)

Describing it as a "magnanimous and heartwarming gesture", Prof. Hewavisenthi stressed that the medical students from the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo, had gone that "extra mile" beyond just caring, comforting and attending to the medical needs of Sonakshi.

Appreciative of the fact that they had broken 'faculty barriers' and supported a worthy cause, Prof. Hewavisenthi added that it was a "great start" to the fundraising campaign of the CNCLD.

Prof. Dissanayake said that living in challenging times "we need to help each other in multiple ways. Sri Lanka is a small country and we should use the resources in an optimal manner".

The most important participants at the simple function were Sonakshi's Amma and Thaththa, Shalika and Mahesh for whom their baby girl would live on in the lives that will be saved by the CNCLD.

Hope, once again, through the tears!

You could give a helping hand to the 'REVIVE' Project

Lend a helping hand with whatever you can afford, for the Colombo North Centre for Liver Diseases (CNCLD) to continue their work through the 'REVIVE' Project.

Big or small, your 'mite' will go towards saving the lives of both children and adults.

The 'REVIVE' Project is a charity set-up by the CNCLD to expand operating theatres and intensive care unit (ICU) facilities; set up a training and research space with regard to liver disease; and support patients following liver transplantation.

Donations may be sent to: The 'REVIVE Liver Fund'.
The account details are:

- Account No – 055 1001 9004 5504
- Account Name – University of Kelaniya Colombo North Centre for Liver Diseases
- Bank Name – People's Bank
- Bank Branch – Kelaniya
- Branch Code – 055
- Swift Code – PSBKLKX

