

Obituary

An Enduring Legacy in Caring for Eyes in Leprosy: Margaret Brand: 1919–2014



Dr. Margaret Elizabeth Brand passed away on 17th November 2014, eleven years after the death of her husband Dr Paul Brand, and she is survived by her children. Her journey had wound through several decades of tumultuous and enormous changes globally in the battle against leprosy and she left an indelible mark in the field of leprosy, through a saga of grit, love and endurance. Margaret Brand was probably the best ‘Ocular Leprologist’ in the world. Years before I was even born, in the year 1948, she had started working in ophthalmology at the Schell Eye hospital at the Christian Medical

College, Vellore and then in leprosy at the Schieffelin Leprosy Research and Training Center (SLRTC) in South India, places where she continued her work for several decades. Her vast experience in the field of leprosy and specifically in the ophthalmic aspects of the disease made her a veritable expert in the field at a time when there was tremendous stigma and fear associated with the disease. Those were the chaotic days of promim, dapsone, maggots, ulcers, amputations and severe ocular complications such as acute iridocyclitis with florid hypopyons and corneal ulcers leading to endophthalmitis, the likes of which have not been observed in recent times. Her world of leprosy included patients who came from all parts of the sub-continent to her for eye care and her colleagues who were towering giants and pioneers in various sub-specialties of leprosy: the world renowned orthopedician and author Dr Paul Brand who was her beloved husband; Dr Charles K Job a pioneer of leprosy pathology; Dr Robert G Cochrane who introduced innovative treatments in leprosy and Dr PSS Sundar Rao who had helped publish some of the best statistics in the leprosy field in India at that time. Her expertise in providing eye care in leprosy derived from a blend of knowing the systemic disease well and using that as a background and context to treat the manifestations that appeared in the eye.

She loved her patients and her patients loved her back. She took utmost care to examine the eyes and her case notes were meticulous. She taught the ophthalmologists at the SLRTC and elsewhere that it was important to record findings and maintain precise case notes. Many years and decades down the line, younger ophthalmologists would wonder at the enormous amount of detail she put into her ophthalmology notes in her elegant handwriting at a time when there were no such things as computers. These details were critical in ascertaining whether certain surgical procedures and treatments were successful on a long term basis.

She assimilated newer techniques that evolved in ophthalmology into the eye care of her patients, especially in the field of oculo-plastic surgery. She always had words of kindness and comfort for all of her patients, especially the ones who were badly deformed and in acute distress. Her words of encouragement always lightened their burden and made them smile back at her. She reveled in such service and yet she would never admit that it was a service – she called it a privilege. Those of us who were fortunate in seeing her examining patients knew that it was true, it was a privilege. An incredible facet of her life was that she had time for all of her long winding line of patients, her co-workers and whoever wished to talk to her. She was a mother of six children and the wife of a world famous globe-trotting husband, who was away for months at a time, but she effortlessly gave of her time to anybody that asked for it.

She had such gentleness when she wanted to settle a patient on the slitlamp for a closer look at their eyes. Patients who expected to be shunned, because of their horrible deformities or their foul-smelling ulcers, were astonished at how she would touch their face and their head with a smile and without the usual signs of reluctance and hesitancy that they had resigned themselves to expect even from their kith and kin. A thick plastic barrier which was fixed to one of the slitlamps, presumably put there by an ophthalmologist who wanted to avoid coming in close contact with the leprosy patients, miraculously and mysteriously disappeared one day. Instances like these in which ophthalmologists changed their attitudes were a reflection of the way in which she respected and treated patients that spontaneously broke down virtual Berlin walls. It was a Margaret effect that would touch and re-mold several generations of care givers in the field of leprosy.

In 1966 Margaret left India to take up a position as the head of ophthalmology at the Gillis W. Long Hansen's Disease (Leprosy) Center in Carville, Louisiana where she had the privilege of treating leprosy patients for another twenty years. She retired and settled in Seattle with her husband, but her activities in teaching and training in ocular leprosy continued long after that until the beginning of the 21st century. She was a passionate and practical teacher. Her clinical demonstrations in ocular leprosy were sights to behold. The patient would be completely at ease and so would her audience that could at any one time consist of nurses, physicians, medical students, physiotherapy students, ophthalmologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, para-medical workers, general health workers, dermatologists and administrators, both national and international. Such teaching scenarios could be played out in a dingy out-patient leprosy clinic of a small town in rural India or it could be in WHO-recognized training institutions such as SLRTC in South India and ALERT in Addis Ababa and or in a Dermatological institute in China. They might occur through formally structured courses or relatively long term informal courses. Her teaching played out in the corridors of the learned at forums organized by the WHO and other numerous NGOs as well as in unlikely places such as a disused operating theatre where oculo-plastic surgeries were demonstrated by sunlight streaming through the windows and as the day wore on by flash light.

She transferred a legacy of genuine love and affection for leprosy patients to all whom she taught. Her students saw something in her that they wanted to emulate. Her colleagues and those she came in contact with—even fleetingly—would remember her for knowing their names, the names of their children and their grandchildren. She genuinely liked people because she considered them children of God. She had time for people and no time for research as the modern world would define. Her work was her research. She left it for others to take and demonstrate such work by making them into publishable peer reviewed

manuscripts. She represented the American Leprosy Mission (ALM) and was their board member and consultant for several years. She would readily tell anyone who asked her that her strength came from her Lord Jesus Christ. She lived and breathed the teachings of Christ and now that she has left this world, there are thousands who would silently thank her for a life so joyfully lived and thank God that in some way her life touched theirs I am one of them.

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