Media Release

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Monash hosts Sri Lankan community medicine program

Six Sri Lankan medical graduates have just arrived at Monash University for a year of training in public health. The School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine (SPHPM) will train the mid-career doctors for key public health and administrative roles in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan Ministry of Health sponsors the program, which provides both research and practical experience. Professor John McNeil, Head of SPHPM, sees the program as a very practical contribution to health in South East Asia.

“The opportunity to train the future leaders in public health in Sri Lanka is a great privilege for us. To date we have provided 13 one- or two-year placements and we keep in regular contact with our alumni as they progress into senior roles,” he said.

Monash University has a strong reputation within the program and is a favoured site for training. The doctors will participate in research and attend short courses provided by the SPHPM.

They will also see first-hand how organisations such as VicHealth, the Victorian Department of Human Services, Victorian Cancer Council and local community services contribute to public health.

Dr Elizabeth Douglas is the coordinator of the program and provides support and mentoring.

“There are sufficient cultural similarities to allow our Sri Lankan colleagues an easy transition and adaptation to the Australian environment. They are exposed to a broad range of public health research and practice.”

The participants are highly accomplished graduates with strong potential for leadership in teaching and public health practice. To gain their qualification, they must spend a year in an overseas centre of excellence in public health research. The focus for the six doctors will be to gain wider knowledge of their specialised areas.

Dr Pushpika Jayalath’s interest is in aging, which has become a serious problem in Sri Lanka. The rate of aging has increased and is similar to that in developed countries, with 12–15% of population aged over 60 years.

“ Compared to developed countries, Sri Lanka lacks strong and effective policies. I’m wanting to study the age care programs in developed countries and adapt those strategies to our country,” Dr Jayalath said.

Standards in the field of epidemiology are already well developed in Sri Lanka and comparable with most developed countries. However, Dr Badrika Wijesundara thinks that there is still work to be done.

“We still need to introduce a lot more strategies and new technologies. I want to contribute to the field of epidemiology in Sri Lanka with new strategies and technologies which I learn in Australia,” she said.
Dr Manori Malawaraarachchi will focus on the epidemiology of infectious disease and outbreak investigation. She hopes to gain a greater knowledge of new areas such as research, statistical analysis and public health.

The two fields of occupational and environmental health are not widely developed in Sri Lanka. Dr Inoka Suraweera and Dr Chandima Siritunga study in these fields and are particularly excited about the training at Monash.

“I’m hoping to gain knowledge and experience in exposure, data and surveillance and in addition health promotion in occupational settings,” said Dr Suraweera.

Dr Siritunga said his involvement in environmental health research in Australia will provide him with an understanding of the different health systems in a developed country, in hospitals and public health institutions.”

Past participants have also reported an enriching family experience. Most bring a spouse and children. The children spend a year in an Australian school, broadening their experience, becoming fluent in English and forging international friendships. Lasting friendships also develop between the visiting academics and the SPHPM staff.

Professors Michael Abramson and Brian Oldenburg of SPHPM, recently strengthened ties with past participants on a visit to Sri Lanka. Visits such as these maintain contact and provide assistance on important public health projects.

The program also provides Monash University with the opportunity to increase involvement in other aspects of the Sri Lankan health system, including the provision of postgraduate degrees and research collaboration. In fact, the Community Medicine program has already given Monash the potential to become the key overseas provider of postgraduate experience for Sri Lankan health professionals.

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