

"I think India will have a big role in making SARS-Cov-2 vaccines for the world."

- DR. PRIYA ABRAHAM

[Click here to watch the full interview with Dr. Abraham.](#)



At the Forefront of the Fight Against COVID-19: Dr. Priya Abraham (Batch '81)

In November 2019, just two months before the first coronavirus case was detected in India, Dr. Priya Abraham was appointed as the Director of the National Institute of Virology (NIV) in Pune, India. Since then, Dr. Abraham and her team have been actively engaged in various aspects of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, including diagnostic and vaccine-related efforts.

In an interview with Dr. Honorine Ward (Batch '69), Dr. Abraham discusses NIV's leading efforts in diagnostics and vaccine development in India and her leadership at a prominent governmental institution as a CMC alumna.

Dr. Honorine Ward: You and your team at NIV were instrumental in isolating and sequencing one or more strains of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. How has this enabled NIV to work on developing diagnostics and vaccines for COVID-19?

Dr. Priya Abraham: Successfully isolating the virus in early March gave us the leverage to make our first indigenous ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay), at a time when there were no good serological assays.

Another big benefit from our ability to isolate and grow the virus was that we successfully propagated 11 or 12 strains in the laboratory - this contributed to the development of a vaccine. We are working closely with Bharat Biotech on a vaccine candidate. Apart from giving them our strain, we have conducted virus challenge experiments as part of pre-clinical trials, which are essential to vaccine development.

With regard to sequencing, the first two sequences from India came out of the first three cases that were detected in this institute. I am privileged to work with great scientists

who are comfortable with whole genome sequencing. We've been able to look at 700 odd SARS-CoV-2 strains and have also generated about 300 odd sequences to look at the profile of "clades" in our country. It was heartening to know that the real time polymerase chain reaction (PCR) assay that we put together was able to identify all these different varied strains, which meant it was robust enough as a diagnostic tool.

H: And have you been able to develop new rapid tests?

P: Right now, we do not have a rapid test, but we have developed a real time PCR Kit, where we have put together the probe, *(continued on page 3)*

Dr. Ida B. Scudder Assisted Living Center

On September 16th, the doors to the Center for retired CMC faculty and staff officially opened!

Read more on page 4.



PLEASE JOIN US FOR OUR
UPCOMING EVENTS

**OCT. 16: ECUMENICAL
LEADERSHIP FORUM**

We will explore solutions and new opportunities for Christian ministry in the areas of education, volunteerism and transformational medical ministry.

**OCT. 30: SETHUPATHY
LECTURE ON CREATING
HARMONY BETWEEN FAITH
AND SCIENCE**

BioLogos' Praveen Sethupathy will discuss the organization's mission to "providing the much-needed space for wrestling with the tough questions of life with civility, integrity, and rigor."

If you have not received an invitation, please email Deepika Srivastava at deepika@vellorecmc.org.

**OTHER VIRTUAL UPCOMING
EVENTS:**

- Oct. 30: FOV Roundtable
- Nov. 7: CMC College of Nursing Alumni Reunion
- Nov. 20: Vellore CMC Foundation Stakeholders Roundtable
- Dec. 8: Dr. Ida Scudder Oration

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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear Friends of CMC and the Vellore CMC Foundation,

As I write to you, our world has witnessed the death of its one millionth citizen (due to the coronavirus); racial tensions have risen to new heights, and the global economy is suffering from a significant slowdown due to the immediate and near-term impact of an ongoing pandemic and the long-term damage it has dealt to the prospects of future sustainable growth.

All of this is to say that while we are paying close attention to the important issues of the day, we (at the Foundation) are also remaining laser-focused on our mission of providing financial and programmatic support to CMC. In these most challenging of times, the Foundation's board and its staff members have been diligently leading our efforts to (1) support CMC's response to the coronavirus, (2) work with the U.S. alumni to coordinate its GOTC event and other virtual opportunities for fellowship, and (3) to collaborate with faith-based communities to create opportunities for medical missionary work and a deeper communion amongst the various U.S. and global denominations.

The Foundation has once again been named a recipient of USAID's American Schools and Hospital Abroad (ASHA) program, which will create an opportunity for CMC to build and equip a new advanced simulation training center. Designated for use by nursing students and emergency teams in anesthesia, obstetrics, and pediatrics, this simulation lab will incorporate America's best protocols and patient safety practices, while demonstrating our and India's shared values of women's empowerment, inclusivity, and critical thinking.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

In this edition of *Voices of Vellore*, we feature the work of Dr. Priya Abraham, one of CMC's finest researchers and the current Director of the National Institute of Virology, in Pune, India. In addition, we showcase CMC's response to the recent coronavirus surge in India, introduce the Foundation's newly launched website, and express our deep appreciation to Drs. C.J. and Sara Alexander for their extraordinary and meaningful contributions to CMC's Department of Hematology.

As in the past, it is my genuine hope that you find our new edition of *Voices of Vellore* both informative, enjoyable, and current!

With much appreciation and my fondest regards,

John A. Riehl

(continued from page 1)

the primers, and the right concentration of enzymes. We have in fact standardized it such that instead of running the PCR in three-to-four tubes, where we are looking at different genes of SARS-CoV-2, it's been standardized so that all the different genes are amplified in one tube. Therefore, you can run many more samples at one go, in a single plate. This assay has been validated by WHO, and we received a 100% performance rating. We have packaged it as ICMR-NIV's kit.



H: NIV played a key role in empowering diagnostic laboratories for SARS-COV-2, as well as for antibody testing across the country. Have these efforts played a significant role in supporting efforts to trace and isolate cases?

P: In 2016, the Indian government set up a network of virus reference diagnostic laboratories, meant to be geared for outbreak response. This network was really handy to have around.

When we found our first cases, it was a very intense period of empowering some of these laboratories scattered across the country. There were a flurry of questions and clarifications they wanted from us, so we ran a QC/QA program for them. That was a very demanding time, but now these laboratories are doing a fantastic job. We started with training and hand-holding 13 labs, and today several government labs are using this assay. We've shipped out around 5.7 million PCR reactions to the length and breadth of the country.

H: What are the major challenges you have faced and the lessons you have learned from this pandemic?

P: One of the major challenges in early times was the timely procurement of reagents, particularly probes, good quality primers, and RNA extraction kits. This was because the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) was looking to us to procure and ship out PCR kits and run a quality control. Procurement of materials from overseas when flights were grinding to a halt was extremely challenging.

Regarding lessons learned, I know it sounds cliché, but I think to function amidst these challenges, there's nothing like good team building. One must encourage one's team and get even the more reticent team members back onto the center stage!

"I hope they see in me a leader who's trying to take the entire team along and I hope they see a little of what we have imbibed from CMC, and that is the culture of hard work, sincerity and integrity."

- Dr. Priya Abraham

H: CMC faculty, like yourself and Dr. Gagandeep Kang, have taken leadership positions in prominent governmental institutions in India. What does this imply for CMC's prominence at the national level, and where do you see CMC and India's science in healthcare when benchmarked internationally?

P: Well, I would say for one that CMC alumni have held and will continue to hold positions in government institutions of national repute. I believe that the government will reach out to CMC whenever they think the necessary expertise is required. I think yes, CMC will influence policy at the national level.

CMC's clinical laboratories are all nationally accredited. Clinical Virology, Clinical Microbiology and Clinical Biochemistry and the Transfusion Medicine laboratory are quality assurance providers for the whole

country: hundreds of labs approach CMC laboratories for quality assurance.

If we look at India, I think the country will have a big role to play in making SARS-CoV-2 vaccines for the world. The Oxford Astra Zeneca vaccine team is working with Serum Institute of India. In fact, the Serum Institute of India has also approached us for help. They are going to be making an indigenous vaccine, and we will be giving them our full support.

While no one has landed on the right antiviral agent yet, I do know that when we do, India will run with it and will provide bulk manufacturing at an affordable price. I'm confident India will do that for the rest of the world.

H: As a woman in India, how does your prominent visibility serve as a role model for young Indian women who want to become scientists?

P: I hope they see in me a leader who's trying to take the entire team along and I hope they see a little of what we have imbibed from CMC, and that is the culture of hard work, sincerity and integrity.

When we are in a prominent position like this, they need to see a bit of our work culture. We should be approachable and available to all, even for our younger scientists. So, I've been trying to do that. My job is not complete...

I hope they're seeing a good reflection of somebody who's trying to balance work with family. I carve out time every evening, to catch up with my family in Vellore. At work, I am trying to be a good human being and also do some science!

CMC Opens One-of-a-Kind Dr. Ida Belle Scudder Assisted Living Center

On September 16, 2020, CMC organized a ribbon-cutting ceremony held at its newly completed Assisted Living Center, at which the North American Alumni Association, the Scudder Family, and CMC's many other supporters were recognized for their extreme generosity. The new facility, named in honor of Dr. Ida Belle Scudder, was constructed to provide care for CMC's retired faculty and staff.

The event commenced with an opening prayer by CMC's Head Chaplin, Rev. Arhul Dhas, which was followed by the official ribbon cutting by Dr. Premila Lee, Nursing Superintendent, signifying the commitment of CMC's nursing staff to play a primary role in running the day-to-day operation of the Center.

Dr. Honorine Ward (Batch '69) recalled the history of this endeavor, most of which took place during her tenure as Chair of the Board of Directors of Vellore CMC Foundation. Beginning in 2014, Dr. Albert Johnson (Batch '61), led a fundraising initiative amongst the CMC Alumni in the United States for the development of a medical care and convalescing facility for retired CMC faculty and staff. Dr. Johnson's activities were done in tandem with the generous support of the Scudder Association



Foundation and Dr. Robert (Rob) Fish, DDS. Dr. Fish, the nephew of Dr. Ida B. Scudder, was humbled to contribute to this project, requesting that the facility be named in memory of his Aunt Ida B.

Reflecting back, Dr. Fish noted "I realized what has kept me passionate about life and my career is a lesson that I learned at CMC – that you do the best job you can every day. I learned that at CMC, and from my aunt Ida B".

The new facility was constructed to fulfill the primary goal of providing transitional care for those retired CMC alumni in need of short- and intermediate-term medical treatment and rehabilitation. Under the leadership and direction of CMC Director, Dr. J.V. Peter, along with the implementation support of a special task force, this new specialty

care facility, located on Filter Bed Road, was completed to pay tribute to CMC's retired faculty and staff – bringing to fruition an idea and an ideal proposed years ago. The Dr. Ida B. Scudder Center, covering two floors, will have eight rooms, as well as a common lounge, nursing station, and kitchen. Thanks to the generosity of donors the Foundation raised \$350,000 for this project that will not only fund the construction of the facility but will support the Nursing/ Housekeeping staffing and maintenance for the next three years!

Although there have been many twists on the road to the opening of the Dr. Ida B. Scudder Assisted Living Center, it has been achieved as a collaborative effort of CMC's Leadership, Staff, Alumni, Supporters, and the Scudder Family.



The dedication ceremony was broadcast to all supporters. A recording may be viewed on our website.

"I realized what has kept me passionate about life and my career is a lesson I learned at CMC – that you do the best job you can every day. I learned that at CMC, and from my aunt Ida B."

- Dr. Rob Fish

2020 GOTC Reflections

By Dr. Margaret Kumar, President of the North American Alumni Association (CON Batch '63)

The 2020 GOTC was originally scheduled to take place in Minneapolis, MN with Alex and Priya (Mariam) Alexander (Batch '88) and their team of CMC Graduates in the area as Hosts. This team, especially Alex, had spent many hours planning the details of the event, when it became apparent that because of COVID, the GOTC would need to be either canceled or postponed. This was a major disappointment for many alumni who have supported and attended the reunion faithfully for years.

Thankfully, Dr. Ponna Thurairatnam (Batch '73) suggested the brilliant idea that the 2020 GOTC should be hosted as a virtual reunion instead. Since many of us were already using Zoom for meetings and online teaching, we

happily pursued the idea, and with the assistance of the Vellore CMC Foundation, who very graciously offered to coordinate the technical aspects of the event, it came to fruition. To our delight, there were over 150 registrants from Canada, UK, India, and USA, all of whom attended this "virtual" reunion. A token collection of \$10.00 was taken to help cover expenses.

The program included a CMC update provided by CMC Director, Dr. J.V. Peter, as well as inspiring short presentations by alumni, followed by entertainment and traditional baila dancing. It was a lot of fun as the camera panned over the entire group of attendees with people dancing on the floor – true GOTC style. A solemn yet powerful service ended the evening with the emotion-filled



Dr. Kalyani Premkumar's (Batch '76) special performance of "I'll Never Find Another You" for eGOTC.

vesper and college song.

We would like to acknowledge the following people who worked hard to make this very first Virtual GOTC a successful event: Ponna Thurairatnam, Samson Jesudass (Batch '86) Anita Sharan (CON Batch), Sudi Devanesen (Batch '62), AK Dayal (Batch '71), Kirti Shetty (Batch '83), Albert Johnson (Batch '61), and Christie Thomas (Batch '75). In addition, many thanks go out to John Riehl, Trish Carroll, and particularly Mabel Haro from the Foundation for their excellent support.

How Social Distancing Has Brought Us Closer Together



In every part of the world, the desire to protect our own wellbeing and that of our families has created a newfound imperative for social distancing. Although challenging, the spread of the coronavirus has also helped each of us rediscover how much we need and depend upon each other. We have all become more keenly aware of our need for essential workers (from medical professionals to mail delivery persons), but what has also become abundantly clear is our need to create opportunities for social interaction using video conferencing and similar communications technologies to do so.

While video conferencing does not possess all the advantages of being in the same room with the members of our CMC community, the Foundation's recent use of Zoom has proved to be more effective than any other solution available. It has allowed us to facilitate conversations, lectures, prayer gatherings, and concerts, as well as the engagement of our Board and Foundation members, who have from a distance shared their individual skills and inspiration to assist us in reaching our 2020 goals and objectives.

Worth highlighting are the blended voices of the a cappella group, Backtrack Vocals, who sang their way into our hearts back in April during a virtual concert offered to the CMC global community. To have a listen to one of their featured songs, simply [click here](#).

There is no substitution for one-on-one interaction, but in our ability to utilize Zoom more fully, we have learned how to provide an easy-to-use, comfortable platform for sharing and fellowship at a time when we all may need it the most.

CMC's COVID-19 Preparedness and Response

- ✚ 910 total beds for COVID management
- ✚ 830 Level 1 and 2 isolation beds
- ✚ 80 ICU beds
- ✚ 400 PCR tests performed daily
- ✚ More than 8,000 COVID patients admitted



Recognition and Awards



"Excellence in hospital preparedness for COVID-19"



"Workplace safety during Covid-19 Pandemic - Large Hospital"



Healthgiri award: "Best charity hospital combating COVID-19"

CMC Director Update on the Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Dr. J.V. Peter

CMC was one of the first private institutions in India to be approved as a COVID-19 testing and treating center. In March, the State and Local Government authorities approached CMC with the request to provide as many beds as possible for COVID treatment. Dedicated COVID ICUs and isolation wards were prepared, and infrastructure changes were implemented to enable our hospitals and campuses to cater to suspected COVID patients.

Shifting Priorities: Following the request from the Ranipet District, a section of the inpatient block in Kannigapuram that is under construction was readied quickly to admit COVID-19 patients. After obtaining official permission, three wards with a total of 168 beds were commissioned for the care of Level 1 patients. So far, over

1,200 patients have been admitted in this campus. Work is going on to operationalize ICU beds so that COVID work can be moved to Kannigapuram temporarily to free up capacity in the town campus when transport resumes and our patients return.

Education and Training: Right from the start of the pandemic, CMC was committed to developing educational material on COVID for use within the institution and for dissemination to various partners in the government and in the mission setup. CMC, through the Distance Education Department, created two online training modules. One is for doctors and nurses, and was supported by a grant from TATA Trust, wherein around 5,000 doctors and nurses from across the country are being trained in COVID. The second program, COVID Surakshya, again developed by the Distance Education Department,

has been funded by the Azim Premji Foundation and targets the training of over 10,000 grass root level workers across India.

Workplace Safety: It is essential that we provide our staff and patients with good protection – especially N95 masks, face shields and full body bio-suits. This is needed not only in the COVID wards, but also in many other areas of the hospital, since we can't tell who may be infected. The hospital spends approximately \$400,000 every month on protective equipment.

For the full update from Dr. J.V. Peter, please [click here](#).

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GENEROSITY IN TIMES OF COVID

CMC Alumni Come Together for their Alma Mater

In response to an appeal by CMC Director, J.V. Peter, alumni batches are presently and quickly organizing to help mitigate financial hardships brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. While CMC has become an exemplar of COVID19 preparedness and response, they have also been faced with multiple challenges due to reduced income and higher than normal cash outflows.

One of the challenges faced by CMC is the completion of the Level One Trauma Care and Specialty Medicine Center located at Kannigapuram. Construction has come to a halt and sections of the completed facility have been redeployed for COVID care. In his appeal, Dr. Peter shared his view that "as we tackle these challenges, we

are reaching out to you, our alumni, to consider contributing to this important venture. We have all benefitted greatly from our alma mater in terms of excellent training at a highly subsidized cost. This is a wonderful opportunity to give back."

So far, batches from the years 1957 to 2006 have raised over \$90,000 from around the world! Whether contributions are used to help subsidize patient care, support CMC's COVID response, or for the new Kannigapuram campus, every donation will ensure that CMC can continue to provide the best quality care for everyone who comes through their doors, independent of their ability to pay.

CMC is offering naming opportunities at the new Kannigapuram campus.

DESIGNATION	AMOUNT
OPD room	\$14,000
Private room	\$20,000
General ward pod with seven beds	\$34,000
Operation theatre	\$68,000
General ward	\$136,000
One complete floor in a block	\$273,000

For further information or inquiries, please contact Mabel Haro at mabel.haro@vellorecmc.org.

Personal Passion Drives Gift to the Hematology Department



"The value of Molecular and Genomic studies is limitless in the current practice of Medical Oncology and Hematology. I am proud of CMC for starting a division specializing in this field and the remarkable research projects that are ongoing. I am blessed to support them in this endeavor and to express my gratitude to my alma mater."

- Dr. Sarah Alexander (Batch '60)

Amid uncertainty and chaos, Dr. Sarah Alexander (Batch '60), and her husband, C.J. Alexander, a Ph.D chemist, made a generous gift to the Hematology Department at CMC for DNA and RNA extraction equipment that will result in high quality and quantity of nucleic acid for all the molecular biology testing with shorter turnaround time. This significant investment into state-of-the-art equipment will improve the department services as well as their ongoing work.



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Have You Visited Our New Website?



After many months of hard work, our redeveloped website is now live! You can find us here: www.vellorecmc.org.

Our goal with the new website was to better highlight the impact of our partnerships with dedicated supporters like you, while providing readers an easy way to learn more about CMC's work and accomplishments. Among the new features is a dynamic [Newsroom](#) that will bring improved communications with our audience. It will be updated regularly with articles, newsletters, event announcements and more!

We hope you find the new website fresh, modern, and informative. We worked hard to make sure it contains valuable information for our current and prospective friends and supporters. Please share with us any comments or feedback you may have at foundation@vellorecmc.org.

The Vellore Christian Medical College Foundation



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