In June 2014 Associate Professor John Moore was approached by the Australian Sri Lanka Society of NSW asking for our help and expertise in the field of Stem Cell Transplant. After an initial conversation, John and I, made a special trip to Colombo to find out more about the project. That was the beginning of the relationship with Dr Prasad Abeyasinghe and his team in the National Cancer Institute (NCI), Colombo, Sri Lanka.

A year later, with the support of the federal government and the the Australia Sri Lanka Association, 16 members of the team from Colombo boarded a plane bound for Sydney. For three months they received their initial intensive education and training from the team at St Vincent’s Hospital (SVH). Returning to Colombo they continued their training and preparations of the facilities. Through regular video conferences and the e-learning programmes, myself and the team in Sydney offered continuous mentoring and helped to design their transplant ward and stem cell facilities.

This October, we reached a milestone in our journey, when three of us, Amanda, Helen and I, set off bound for Colombo on the 20th of October to watch the team perform their first ever transplant. Reflecting on the trip we gained great insight into Sri Lankan culture and health care. And most importantly about the value of collaboration. These are just some of our insights:

A NEW AGE OF MEDICINE IS DAWNING IN SRI LANKA.

Commonly held perspectives would have you imagine Sri Lanka as a chaotic and overwhelming country. And landing in Colombo during an intensely hot and humid day we certainly experienced this first hand. Tuk tuks were rushing everywhere, there were clouds of dust rising from the streets and incessant honking.

But tucked away from the hustle, in a quiet corner we arrived at Razavi Medical Clinic at the National Cancer Institute in Maharagama. The clinic is the first public facility in Sri Lanka to offer Stem Cell Transplant (HSCT). A legoland of brightly painted walls, lush greenery and wide open spaces, it’s clear that deep care and attention has been put into the facility, which was made possible by the London Tea Company, Ahadu. For us, the clinic was a symbol of the dawning of a new age of medicine in Sri Lanka, one where a just level of care, that reflects the mission and values of SVH, is being offered. And not just those who have the means to afford treatment, but for all.

RADICAL GENEROSITY LEADS TO SUCCESS.

Walking the halls, interacting with the team and seeing the pride they had for the clinic was incredibly inspiring, it was a great reminder of the bigger picture and wider impact our work is having.

And generosity of spirit can’t be overlooked either, as we were left with memories of belly laughs, warm handshakes and shared experiences that made deep connections between both teams and created a powerful learning environment for all.

“Coming back to Sydney I noticed a significant change. My smile was bigger and brighter. I felt a real purpose, love and acceptance.”

Sydney team member Amanda.

WHAT’S NEXT?

This project has been eye opening for me and everyone on the team. I sincerely hope that in future more learning partnerships can be modelled on the experience we’ve had. Working in this way is beneficial for everyone. It creates powerful partnerships where all are learning. The world is changing incredibly quickly and by continually striving to widen our perspective we’re able to adapt and change with it.

FOR RICHER OR POORER

More than two years ago, I along with the transplant team embarked on a journey to bring stem cell transplant technology to Sri Lanka; making this life saving procedure accessible to all Sri Lankans, no matter what their means. Together, we brought expertise, training and support to Sri Lanka, all which has proven invaluable. But we also found the experience of being exposed to different perspectives, environments and cultures transformative.