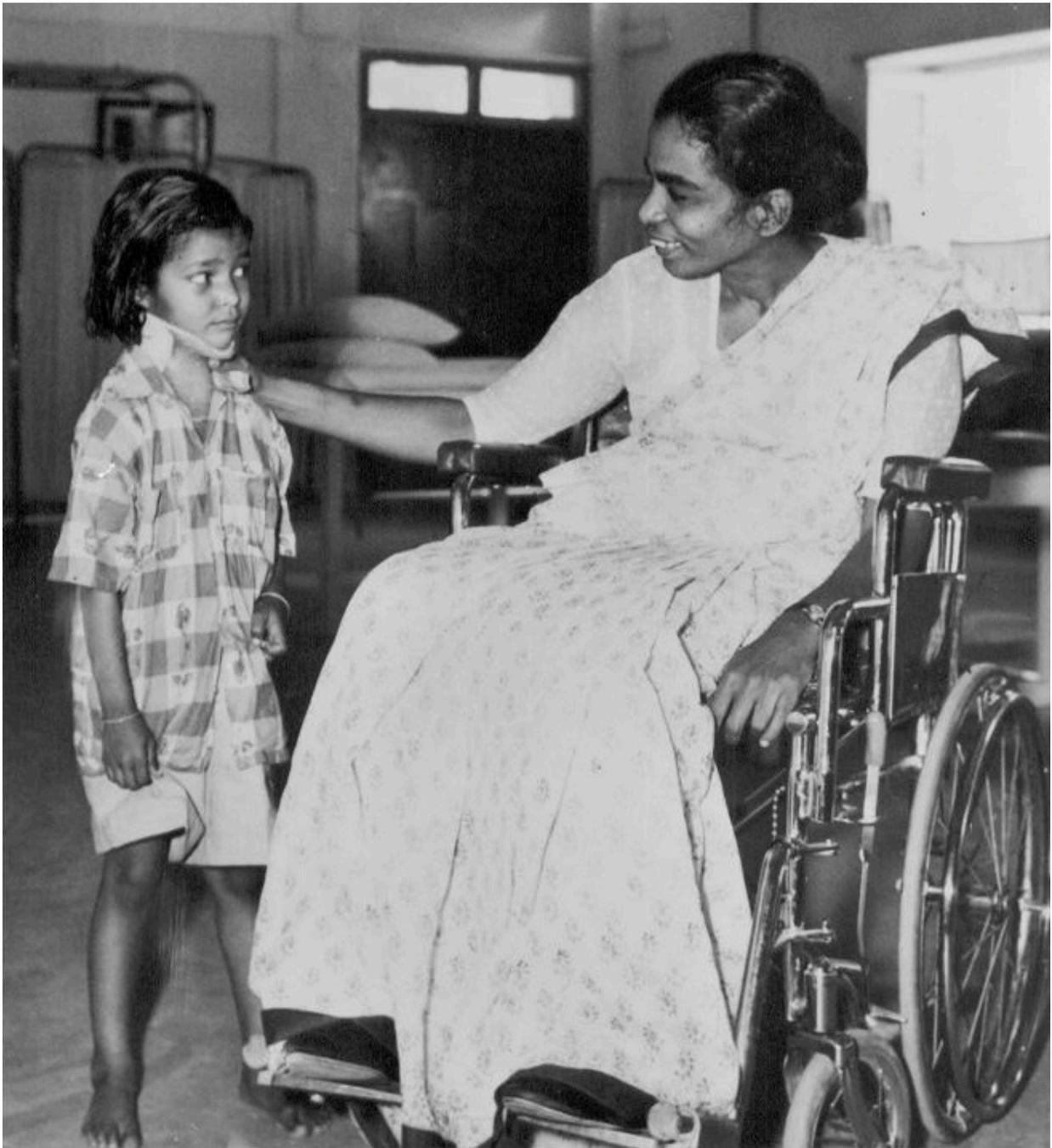




## Dr. Mary Puthisseril Verghese (1925 - 1986)

Paraplegic hand surgeon who headed the country's first department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation with an inpatient facility, at CMC, and expanded its services with the establishment of India's first inpatient rehabilitation institute



*With a young patient at the PMR department of CMC*

**I**t was 30th January 1954, and a holiday to mark the martyrdom of Mahatma Gandhi. Dr. Carol Jameson, the head of Gynaecology, planned an outing for the doctors who were either completing or joining their postings in her department. Soon a car full of young people was on the road, revelling in the day off. While overtaking a bus, the car hit a milestone and turned turtle three times. Two of the thirteen passengers - including Mary - became unconscious. In time, everyone would recover, except Mary: the accident left her a paraplegic.



Mary's carefully patterned and ordained world was turned upside down. There she was, a woman in the prime of her life, disfigured and disabled. There she was, staring at life that she felt was coming to an end just as the best was about to begin. The torturous treatments and many surgeries were nothing compared to the battles in her mind, to the questions and shadows that beset her soul. How could one, who prided herself on her physical strength and independence, reconcile to disability and utter dependence on others?

But pity was the last thing she wanted. *There were small accomplishments - being able to sit in a wheelchair or tying a sari on her own - and as many remember her, she was always impeccably dressed. But what would she do with her medicine degree?* Obstetrics and Gynaecology was out of the question. She was invited to join both Bacteriology and Pathology, but Mary wanted to work with people. That was when Dr. Paul Brand suggested Hand Surgery, since most of the surgeries could be performed sitting. Mary was incredulous at the suggestion, but nevertheless turned up for work the next day. Then she began learning and reaffirming things, techniques and procedures, working with leprosy patients, who saw in her a kindred spirit.

When Dr. Gwenda Lewis, a victim of polio, returned to Vellore from the Australian Rehabilitation Centre, Perth, with the scope of her activities widened, Mary was astonished. With her family's support, she was also able to go to Perth, where she spent months learning skills that made her increasingly independent. It was there that a seed of an idea began to grow - rehabilitation in India? In Vellore?

Thoroughly enthused, Mary was able to secure a fellowship at the Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, New York, under Dr. Howard Rusk, a pioneer in the field. Going to New York, living, working, studying there - even learning to drive - are tributes to her faith, indomitable spirit and dogged determination. She cleared the exams that accredited her to head the new Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation in Vellore, the first of its kind in India.

In 1966, her dreams came to fruition when the Rehabilitation Institute opened: a place of healing, restoring, and reaching out. She also started a fund to raise money for those who could not afford braces, wheelchairs and artificial limbs. Vocational training was an important part of rehabilitation. Today, outreach programmes at the Rehabilitation Institute involve communities and families, in care and rehabilitation.

In her lifetime, she received the highest honours for her pioneering work, including the Padma Shri in 1972. But far beyond the legacy she left - the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, the Rehabilitation Institute or the Dr. Mary Verghese Trust - was her own courageous example of taking disability

and its attendant baggage out of the closet. **"I asked for feet, and I have been given wings."**



*With former Indian Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi*

*(Text reproduced, in part, from CMC Year Book 2010 - '11; images added)*