



Suniti Solomon, Founder-Director Y.R. Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education (YRG CARE).

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**SUPPLEMENT ARTICLE****Suniti Solomon, Founder-Director
Y.R. Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education
(YRG CARE)****N Kumarasamy, K Ranganathan, AR Tappuni, SJ Challacombe**

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Dr Suniti Solomon born on 14 October 1939, in Chennai, India, and died from pancreatic cancer on 28 July 2015, in Chennai, aged 76 years. Dr Solomon did so much to raise awareness of HIV infection and AIDS in India. She gave a moving plenary talk on 'The Social Impact of HIV infection in India' at the beginning of the 7th World Workshop on Oral Health & Disease in AIDS which was held in Hyderabad, India, in November 2014. We were saddened by her loss a few months later, but Dr Solomon has left a permanent legacy by her impact on the health scene in India and her establishment of YRG care which has carried out such fundamental and important clinical trials in conjunction with the NIH AIDS clinical trials programme, and which has been such a beacon in the HIV field.

One of eight siblings, Suniti Solomon was the only daughter of the Gaitonde family who were prominent in the leather trade in Chennai. She qualified in medicine at Madras Medical College where she met her husband, Victor Solomon, a cardiac surgeon. For almost a decade, she trained in pathology in the UK, the USA and Australia, before returning to Chennai in 1973. In the 1980s, after reading about HIV and AIDS, she decided to track the virus in India. That decision set the course of her life.

Dr Suniti Solomon was working as Professor of Microbiology at Madras Medical College when her team first detected HIV in 1986 documenting for the first time the extent of HIV infection in the country. She tested a group of sex workers and found six of them were HIV positive. One of the first patients Dr Solomon diagnosed with HIV was a 13-year-old girl who had been forced into sex work. The prevailing view among some people at that time was that individuals infected with HIV had done something 'immoral'. But this patient was obviously different. 'That case changed me', Solomon later said. The implication was that India faced an HIV epidemic on a large scale. The Indian Government was forced to sit up and take notice.

In 1993, Dr Solomon established one of India's first voluntary HIV counselling and testing facilities, the Y R Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education (now YRG CARE) in Chennai. Since then, the centre has cared for more than 20 000 patients with HIV from across south India and currently treats 100 outpatients a day with 15 000 patients on regular follow-up. The non-profit organisation also educates other doctors about HIV and works to reduce the stigma about people living with HIV. Nagalingeswaran Kumarasamy, Chief Medical Officer at YRG CARE since 1994 and a former student of Solomon's, said 'She was one of the first to talk openly about HIV in India. Her work and the setting up of YRG CARE were significant factors in slowing the epidemic. But she also did a lot to educate other doctors that HIV was not a fatal disease and could be treated'.

Many experts had predicted the disease would cause devastation in the subcontinent, with its tens of thousands of sex workers, brothels and truck drivers, as well as millions of seasonal workers living far from home. Yet today, although India has the third highest number of people living with HIV because of its vast population, the infection rate has remained below about 0.3%. Colleagues say that is due, at least in part, to Suniti Solomon. She was actively involved in the work of the YRG Centre and in HIV education to the end of her life, hosting a major conference in Chennai in January, 2014.

Dr Solomon has published extensively on HIV epidemiology, prevention, care and support, biomedical research, research ethics and gender issues. She served as a scientific member on several national committees. She has received four Lifetime Achievement Awards for her work with AIDS. She was also awarded honorary

doctoral degree in 2006 from Brown University, RI, USA, National Women Bio-scientist Award for the year 2009 by the Department of Biotechnology, New Delhi, and Fellow of the Academy, from National Academy of Medical Science, New Delhi, in 2010. In 2009, the Ministry of Science and Technology conferred the National Award for Women Bioscientists on Dr Solomon. Outside her work, she enjoyed reading and the company of her two golden retrievers. She was predeceased by her husband, who died in 2006, but is survived by her son, Sunil Solomon, an epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins University in the USA.

Her obituary in the *Lancet* noted ‘Suniti Solomon was a dedicated doctor who succeeded against the odds in making her voice heard throughout India. Dr Solomon’s commitment to her patients and her country is what is remembered by colleagues’.

