



## Dr. Paul Wilson Brand (1914 - 2003)

**Hand surgeon who changed forever how leprosy patients were treated by medical professionals & perceived by the rest of the world**



*“In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God’s existence.”*

*Isaac Newton*

**T**his did not seem to hold true for the leprosy patients Dr. Paul Brand first encountered as a young boy in the Kolli Hills: he had haunting memories of their stiff hands, covered with sores, missing fingers, stumpy feet and no toes. More disturbing still was that his father had burnt the basket of fruit the men had bought as a token of gratitude.

Such was the aura and stigma of leprosy. And that abhorrent sight of those three men was enough to convince the young Paul that 'Medicine was not for me'.

Dr. Paul Brand was born in India in 1914 to a missionary couple from England. His father had trained as a builder, but both his parents had also taken a brief preparatory course in medicine. They initially settled in the plains but soon moved to the Kolli Hills (often called Kolli Malai meaning 'mountains of death' with reference to malaria) when they heard that the nearly 20,000 people living there had no access to medical care.

He remembered his parents as people of great compassion, who responded to human need wherever they saw it through clinics, churches, schools and an orphanage. His father taught carpentry and tile making to young boys, and helped establish farms and orchards. It was from his father that Dr. Brand inherited his scien-

tific temper - the hills and its flora and fauna were his playground and he was tutored in the many mysteries of the natural world. He was sent back to England in 1923 for a more formal education, but he greatly missed the carefree life of India. Losing his father to a complication of malaria in 1929 was a further blow to the young Paul, even though his widowed mother continued her husband's ministry with a zeal that soon got her christened 'Mother Brand'.

He went into the construction trade, intending to follow his father's footsteps as a missionary builder to India. On completing his five-year course, he enrolled for a year's training in tropical medicine, in preparation for his work. During his course, he was witness to the remarkable recovery of a near-dead woman, whose life was saved by blood transfusion. Putting aside his many doubts and misgivings, Dr. Paul Brand realised medicine could be his anointed path, and he joined the University College Hospital, London, in 1937.

He began his surgical training at a time when England and Europe were in the throes of the Second World War. Attending to the mass casualties, he not only honed his surgical skills, but he also encountered pain of a different kind, and learnt the human side to medicine, and realised how profoundly this approach to treatment affected the perception of pain.

On completing his surgical training in 1946, Dr. Brand came to CMC at the behest of Dr. Robert Cochrane, a dermatologist, and one of the world's leading authorities on leprosy. Dr. Brand spent a year doing general surgery in CMC, and then moved to orthopaedics, but was still unsure of what would constitute his life's work. That is until, one day, he went to Dr. Cochrane's leprosy sanatorium in Chingleput. It was there that he grasped the human tragedy that is leprosy - it just did not disfigure, maim and blind; he was horrified by the melancholic fatalism with which the leprosy patients were furtively shuffled out of life. The new sulfone drug of the day could arrest the disease, but it could not change the fact that they remained social pariahs for the rest of their lives.

Dr. Brand then knew that leprosy was his calling. **The fact that there was practically no literature on the orthopaedic aspects of leprosy piqued his curiosity and he began to ask questions about leprosy. What was the pattern of paralysis and its**

**unusual progression? How could stunted, shortened fingers constitute normal tissue samples? What caused their flesh to rot away?**

It took a decade of painstaking work at the Hand Research Unit to answer these and other questions that nobody had bothered about...

But what perplexed him most was the 'bad flesh' that caused the tissue to rot away and shortened fingers and feet. And one day, he stumbled upon the culprit, and reached the startling conclusion that painlessness was the most destructive aspect of the disease. Leprosy numbed the sensation of pain in parts of the body, to the point where patients were actually injuring themselves through their insensitivity. They lacked the 'gift of pain'. Thus, Dr. Brand was essentially able to piece together an overall picture of leprosy as primarily a disease of the nerves. He took his findings to the highest forums where they were validated and accepted, and he changed forever the world's perceptions and treatment of leprosy affected people.

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



*(l to r) Brand, Scudder, Balfour and Chandy at CMC (1956)*