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Rengaswamy Sankaranarayanan

Radiation oncologist and pioneering cancer researcher. Born on Dec 4, 1952 in Chinna Moolakaraipatti, Tamil Nadu, India, he died on Aug 3, 2025 in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, aged 72 years.

Rengaswamy Sankaranarayanan, known as Sankar, spent 24 years at the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). A trained radiation oncologist, he served as Special Advisor on Cancer Control at IARC from 2013 to 2017 and Head of the Section of Early Detection and Prevention from 2009 to 2015. He led a groundbreaking study that showed a single dose of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine offered equivalent protection to the two-dose and three-dose schedules, prompting WHO to amend its recommendations. The findings have accelerated and simplified the drive to eliminate cervical cancer. "Sankar's study was a game changer—it has had a really impressive effect on vaccination rates. He was devoted to public health and to finding prevention and screening strategies for cancer that would be suitable for low-income settings", said Margaret Stanley, Emeritus Professor of Epithelial Biology at the University of Cambridge, UK.

Sankaranarayanan helped validate inexpensive interventions for cervical cancer screening, such as visual inspection with acetic acid. In 1999, Sankaranarayanan and his colleagues ran the first major trial to compare screening methods, which involved more than 100 000 women from villages in India. The investigators came in for criticism for including a control group. Nonetheless, the results showed that HPV testing was the most effective means of reducing cases of advanced cervical cancer. "It was a brave

and necessary study", Stanley said. Neerja Bhatla, Professor Emeritus at the National Cancer Institute, All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi, commented "Sankar completely changed the landscape for cervical cancer prevention. He was a very pragmatic individual. He was always conscious of the constraints that health care systems in low-income and middle-income countries were working under, and he would push for solutions that could actually be implemented and maintained." Before the screening trial, he had doubts over whether HPV testing could work in India. But when the results showed otherwise, he adjusted his perspective. "There was nothing dogmatic about Sankar. He had an ability to adapt and accept new research, even if it was contrary to his expectations", said Bhatla.

Sankaranarayanan helped launch demonstration projects that provided a basis for cancer control programmes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and advised governments on all the three continents. A staunch believer in cooperation and mentorship, he routinely arranged for clinicians from Africa to come to India for training in radical surgery. "He recognised if you were going to screen a population, you had to be capable of treating them", Bhatla said. Sankaranarayanan also seemed to remember the name of every person he met. "It endeared him to everyone and paved the way for great partnerships", Bhatla said. She noted that his ability to organise and oversee huge field trials in low-income and middle-income countries helped undermine any lingering notion that high-quality research is the preserve of high-income countries. Partha Basu, Head of the Early Detection, Prevention, and Infections Branch at IARC, told *The Lancet* that he felt "privileged to keep the candle burning that Sankar lit with his inspiring and visionary leadership".

Over the course of his career, Sankaranarayanan travelled extensively and took great pleasure in learning about the places he visited. Flora and fauna were a particular interest. "You would go on a hike with Dr Sankar and he would name all the flowers, plants, and animals...it was a great joy to spend time with him", said Moni Abraham Kuriakose, Medical Director at Karkinos Healthcare in Mumbai, an organisation which aims to improve access to cancer services in India. Sankaranarayanan joined Karkinos as Director of Preventive Oncology after he had left IARC and returned to India. He soon set to work drafting guidelines that would help primary care physicians screen for common cancers and navigate patients to cancer centres. At the time, the newly founded Karkinos "could not afford to pay all our staff", recalled Kuriakose. Sankaranarayanan asked for his salary to be withheld. "He did this very quietly...I only found out because I had sign off on it", said Kuriakose. "He said that the money should go to the junior employees, not to him. That was the kind of man Dr Sankar was." Sankaranarayanan is survived by his wife Subhalakshmi and his son Vikram.

Talha Burki