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India's first rehabilitation centre for disabled turns 50

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VELLORE: On this day, 50 years ago, the Christian Medical College (CMC) Hospital had established the country's first rehabilitation centre at Bagayam in Vellore.

The centre, which is now called Mary Varghese Institute of Rehabilitation, was established by Dr Mary Varghese and inaugurated by then Union health minister Dr Sushila Nayar on November 26, 1966.

From a 16-bed institution, it has grown with a team of medical professionals to treat 800 persons every year.

"The institute given new meaning to many, said Dr Raji Thomas, head of the institution. "It is the first rehabilitation centre in the country," she said.

Varghese joined CMC as a medical student in 1946. The picnic trip during the final year intern-ship had turned her life upside down. The car, in which she was travelling with fellow interns, met with an accident. She suffered spinal cord injury leading to paraplegia, the inability to move both legs from the waist down. She went to Australia for rehabilitation and was trained to be independent using a wheelchair.

On her return, she realised there were no centres for rehabilitation in India. She pursued higher studies in the U.S. and returned to the country with highest PG qualification in rehabilitation.

She started the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (PMR) at CMC, Vellore and subsequently the institute in 1996. It was later named after her. It would treat and rehabilitate patients with spinal cord injury, brain injury, stroke, amputations and cerebral palsy.

Popularly known as 'The Surgeon on Wheelchair', Varghese started to receive patients from across the country. She was honoured with Padma Shri in 1972 for her efforts and pioneering work. She passed away in 1976.

"The objective of the institute is to help people who are substantially and permanently disabled to make the best use of their residual capacity and to lead full and productive lives. It is also aimed to counteract various complications that occur due to primary disability," said Dr Raji Thomas.