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①

A Glimpse into the Past

MEDICINE IN SINGAPORE (PART 11) AFTER WWII

This is the eleventh instalment of a series on the history of medicine in Singapore.

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When World War II ended, the period of the British Military Administration (September 1945 to April 1946), under Military Administrator Lord Louis Francis Mountbatten, was one of urgent improvisation and rehabilitation. All hospitals, clinics and public health services were immediately re-established on an emergency basis. Kandang Kerbau Hospital remained the Civil General Hospital until 1 July 1946, when it resumed as the only obstetrics and gynaecology hospital serving Singapore.

The College of Medicine Building was returned to the College authorities on 1 April 1946 and the College was reopened on 17 June 1946. The 29 medical and dental students who received diplomas from the Japanese Military Administration during the Occupation had to sit for fresh examinations and all of them passed in 1946. From 1941 to 1955, the position of Chair of Pathology was vacant. Pathology teaching was undertaken mainly by Dr C Subrahmanyam (Government Pathologist from 1947

to 1954) and Dr T Balasingam (Senior Lecturer in pathology in the College and later, the University). Dr LS da Silva and Dr RA Cumming assisted in the teaching of pathology in the College during the first two post-war years. Dr da Silva subsequently became the Government Pathologist in 1954 and was succeeded by Dr K Shanmugaratnam in 1957.

Dr Liew Fu San, who was admitted to the College as a dental student in 1940 and who had his education interrupted during the Japanese Occupation (during which he returned to Kuala Lumpur), was one of those who rejoined the College in 1946. He described what it was like: "There was a welcome and noticeable change in the attitude of the professors, who were all expatriates. They were more tolerant, understanding and accessible, and that enabled six of us to change over to medicine. In so doing, I lost a year's study, as I had to start from the second year in the medical class. The professors were also responsible for obtaining bursaries for the rest of the course for almost all the pre-war students. Each bursary amounted to \$75 monthly – \$50 for tuition and board, and \$25 for personal expenses. It was also very heartening to find out after the war that the ties of friendship among colleagues as well as feelings of loyalty to the College were as strong as ever. This was especially manifested whenever our College teams were

confronted by outside forces, notably Raffles College, in games, sports or other competitions. Then, our people, including our ladies, would turn up in full force to boo, insult and demoralise our enemies, and to cheer our boys on to victory. The stimulation was such that our boys would go all out and broken bones (especially among our opponents) often resulted. ... In another inter-college game, our boys hired an elephant from the local circus, to be a mascot and also as a means to intimidate our opponents by parading him up and down the sides of the field with the 'elephant boy' atop, waving our Medical College Union banner. ... Holne Chase (Author's note: the hostel for female students) was a daily haunt for us who had 'friends' there, and evenings would find us arriving just before or during dinner time, so that we could reserve our favourite bushes, for which the hostel's spacious garden was famous. ... Due to lack of accommodation, most of the Singapore students stayed at home... FMS [Federated Malay States] Hostel being situated on higher ground than the nursing sisters' quarters, provided vantage views of 'free strip tease shows'. ... We lived very simply, freely and 'naturally' in the FMS Hostel, and any time of the day and night, it was common to see students moving about in their birthday suits. ... In my fifth medical year, the status of the College was raised to that of a university. Life in

the clinical years was more rewarding and prestigious. Prof Ransome would invariably address us as 'doctor', whether in or outside the ward, and this gave us confidence in tackling our patients. ... The vast majority of us at the FMS Hostel had a great zest for fun and living, being for the most part, loud and boisterous in speech and behaviour. But we never did at any time lose sight of the one primary goal, which had brought us to the Hostel, that is, to become good doctors. And neither did we ever sacrifice moral or religious principles just for pleasure."¹

Dr Gene Ng was admitted to the College in 1947. She told of what life was like for a female undergraduate, coming from a much-sheltered and pampered atmosphere at home and a Convent school. "I reported at the faculty office. ... Two other girls registered with me. ... [A]s we left the office together, three senior ladies ... yelled out 'Hey freshies, follow us'. Meekly we were led to the ladies' cloakroom ... where a dozen or so senior ladies were having their siesta. ... Our 'inquisition' lasted over an hour, during which our life histories were unfolded and exposed... ... Before dismissal, we were taught ... to introduce ourselves always as 'stinking blinking freshie so and so'. ... [I had] second thoughts later that evening, as I unpacked, whether I should proceed or return home. I never had the slightest notion that such a thing as ragging existed, and was really confused and frightened by that first experience. Holne Chase ... was then a spacious and homely hostel for about 30 female medical undergraduates, surrounded by lovely undulating lawns and studded with large spreading trees and flowering bushes, providing much shade and privacy. The top floor contained a connecting hall-lounge and rooms, while the ground floor held the rooms for the students and the matron's quarters, a big dining room, and a laundry area. At the back were the kitchen and servants' quarters. Besides the English matron, we had a staff of nine to see to our needs and comforts, and we really lived it up in style. For a small tip at the end of



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2

the month, we could get our room *amahs* to do anything for us, including cleaning shoes, filling up flasks with hot or ice water, and mending. We were served at the table by three *amahs* and we would order drinks and extra dishes from the cook, who also ran a canteen from morning till 9 pm. Food could be served on order in our rooms or in the public rooms for our guests. Three 'washing' *amahs* rendered us express laundry service – unlimited items sent for washing in the morning were returned in the evening, or the next day, at the latest. Only first-year students had to sign in a book or inform the matron that they would be back late at night. At 9 pm, visitors had to leave the public rooms, and some couples would migrate to the grounds outside, as the doors were then closed for the night. However, a key was placed conveniently nearby for the latecomers. There were not many rules, and although silence was officially imposed at 9 pm, there were still many nooks and corners along the corridors for groups to congregate or get things off their chests. Living there was relatively free and relaxed. ...Every night after dinner, the freshies were summoned to the lounge to entertain the seniors, or relate to them the day's happenings – how we were ragged by the boys and our reactions and responses. As freshies, it was our duty to take phone calls, inform the seniors and others of their guests' or boyfriends' arrival, and carry out errands now and again. They never inflicted any physical ragging, nor did they ever intrude into the privacy of our rooms. What we dreaded most was their hostile and cynical attitude... ...The senior gentlemen did their share of ragging too, apart from the one-day official ragging in the Quadrangle of the FMS Hostel, where we were escorted by some senior ladies. They cornered us at lunchtime (when we had to go to the common dining room), at dances and games, which we were obliged to attend and support or participate in. ... (During a practice session on baton passing,) when I was told to give the order to start, I shouted... 'Ali! Ahmad! *Gasak!* Go!' I was surprised to

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find myself sprinting forward alone, and could not understand why the others were ...splitting their sides with laughter. ...Ruby Majeed who had been my schoolmate, made me repeat correctly after her 'On your marks, get set, go!' As a Standard 1 pupil, I had watched my brother and his friends practise running... and had gone away with the impression that what I had originally shouted were the words they had used. ...At that time, in the midst of our fears and anxieties, we were blind to the good intentions of ragging. But as the years rolled by, we could realise and appreciate all the benefits it brought in the form of unity and comradeship, resulting from the breakdown of all barriers among students of both sexes, and at all levels. ...About a month after registration, ...the freshies dinner ...was held at a restaurant in the Great World Park... Everything changed that night – the seniors became very friendly. ...So great was (the freshies') relief and pleasure on being accepted as equals that many of them had to be carried back drunk that night... The only unhappy victims were the restaurant owner and staff who were faced with so many broken bottles, and crockery and litter all over the place. Besides the ragging, we had other difficulties; eg, not a single textbook was available during that period. Despite that, we still had a good, enjoyable year. ...All lady hostelites were members of the

Holne Chase Club, formed to look after our social interests and welfare. It was very active and organised campfires, dances, cinema shows and other forms of entertainment. ...During the Maria Hertogh riots (in 1955), we were very worried for our matron's safety, as news had reached us that many Europeans had been killed along Orchard Road. ...The senior girls searched for and planned hideouts for her should the need arise. ...As some of our male students found out to their cost, it was an expensive affair to date us. An evening out involved taxi fares, a show or other entertainment and dinner, and many of them had to pay the taxi off at Holne Chase, and later walk to the road junction to catch a bus back."² (Author's note: Now you know where the "Chase" in Holne Chase came from.) ♦

Legend

1. Holne Chase, Grange Road, 1940
2. Preparing for campfire night at Holne Chase Hotel
3. Medical netball team posing for a photo

References

1. Liew SF. *Life as a medical undergraduate 1940-1950. At the Dawn of the Millennium: 75 Years of Our Alumni.* Alumni Association/Singapore University Press, 2000:225-9.
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