

# Tay Syndrome

In Memory of Dr Tay Chong Hai (1932–2022)

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Dr Tay Chong Hai was born in 1932 and graduated from medical school in 1959. He obtained his postgraduate medical degree from the Royal College of Physicians in Glasgow in 1963, and became a Fellow of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore in 1967. Subsequently, he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in Glasgow in 1972, and a Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians in 1982.

He later subspecialised in rheumatology, and was appointed consultant physician at the Singapore General Hospital in 1971. This was soon followed by becoming head of the Department of Medicine at Changi Hospital. In 1978, he left for private practice as a consultant physician and rheumatologist, opening his clinic at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre.

Dr Tay was the first Singaporean physician to have a disease named after him. In 1971, he was referred a young brother and sister who had dry, scaly and itchy skin with painful cracks and fissures on their palms and soles. Their hair was short and so brittle that it broke with the slightest rubbing against a pillow or combing with a hairbrush. They had red skin at birth that remained sensitive

to sunlight. The siblings were short in height and were intellectually challenged. Another brother had died earlier from intestinal obstruction at the age of two months. Their parents were first cousins. Dr Tay looked at the siblings' hair under a polarising light microscope and saw bands running across the shaft, which he described as "tiger stripes". Tay Syndrome was confirmed to be a new disease – a rare autosomal recessive genetic condition (trichothiodystrophy), and the name has appeared in dermatology textbooks since 1975.

Dr Tay has also been involved in other medical issues. He identified arsenic poisoning in some Chinese medicines, including the Sin Lak asthma medicine. He also alerted the authorities to some Chinese medicines that were adulterated with Western medicines, and that steroids like cortisone was being misused. His actions led to the tightening of Singapore laws regulating traditional medicines.

In 1972, he was involved in the first Singapore outbreak of hand, foot and mouth disease, and he helped differentiate this condition from the



other diagnoses that were being made, such as Steven-Johnson Syndrome and chickenpox. He also discovered another new disease – eosinophilic arthritis, an acute arthritis affecting mainly the large joints with elevated eosinophil count.

Dr Tay authored more than a hundred medical articles. He established the National Arthritis Foundation in 1984, and was its chairman for 14 years. In 1988, he was conferred the Life Fellowship of the American Academy of Dermatology. His hobbies included playing golf, and he published a book of his poetry, *The Birth of a New Day*, in 1977. Colleagues describe him as a friendly person with a good sense of humour.

Dr Tay was one of Singapore's outstanding doctors, and is survived by two sons, their wives and five grandchildren.

Rest in peace. ♦

The SMA Council expresses our heartfelt condolences to the family of Dr Tay Chong Hai on his passing on 1 January 2022. Dr Tay was a Life Member of SMA.

## Further readings

1. Lim J. A Pioneering Spirit. *SMA News* 2013; 45(6):30-2.
2. Aboud AA. Chong Hai Tay and the syndrome which bears his name. *Our Dermatol Online* 2013; 4(1):105.
3. Dr Tay Chong Hai. Mount Elizabeth Hospitals. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tuZH5E>.
4. Chong Hai Tay. Whonamedit? Available at: <https://bit.ly/3rgA0DI>.

## Legend

1. Dr Tay and the late President S R Nathan
2. Dr Tay smiling for the camera
3. Dr Tay and his clinic staff

