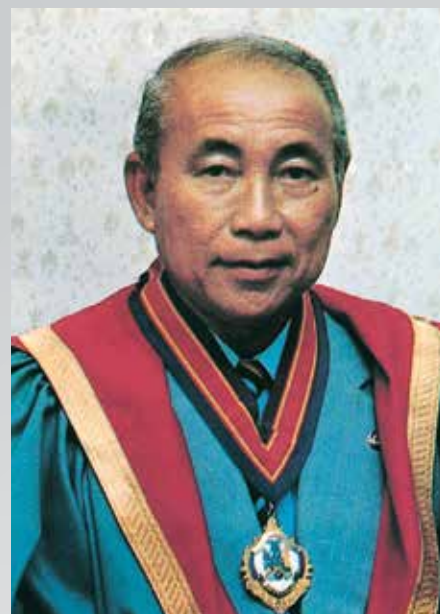


In Memory of

Dr Robert Loh Choo Kiat



Text by Prof Chew Chin Hin, Honorary Advisor, Division of Graduate Medical Studies, National University of Singapore; Emeritus Consultant, Tan Tock Seng Hospital

Dr Robert Loh Choo Kiat (25 May 1925 – 31 January 2017) was born in Singapore in 1925. Despite having his education rudely interrupted by World War II, he graduated in 1949 with a MBBS from Bombay's top medical school – Seth Gordhandas Sunderdas Medical College and the King Edward VII Memorial Hospital. He returned to Singapore soon after, joining Singapore General Hospital (SGH) and initially serving as houseman to Prof ES Monteiro for Medicine and Dr BM John for Surgery (which then included otorhinolaryngology). However, ophthalmology was to be his career-long discipline. After postgraduate training and learning under top surgeons, including the doyen Sir Stewart Duke-Elder at Moorfields in London, he returned to SGH and joined Dr AD Williamson's eye department at Norris Block as a registrar in 1954.

I have known Dr Robert Loh, affectionately addressed as Bob by his dear friends, since 1956, when I was posted to Prof Gordon Ransome's Medical Unit I which was also housed in Norris Block. Over the years, we became firm friends, having a common interest in advancing the standards of professional and ethical practice.

In 1958, Bob was awarded a scholarship. He soon secured the FRCS in Edinburgh and returned hardly a

year later to head the ophthalmology department, following the retirement of Dr Williamson and Dr Wong Kin Yip. Bob and Dr Wong were the first Singaporean heads of ophthalmology in the government sector; the doyens in the private sector from the early years were Drs SH Tan of The Eye Hospital and TH Oh of Eye Clinic.

Bob's contributions to ophthalmology in Singapore have been immense. Starting out with only a handful of trainees, he built up the unit and trained numerous expert eye surgeons within a decade. He transmitted his clinical skills and instituted in them his ideals and values in the treatment of patients, regardless of their social station. It was he who established the first eye bank, as well as introducing micro and laser surgery, implants, retinal detachment surgery, corneal grafting and other innovative procedures.

In 1963, Bob set up the Society of Ophthalmology with only 13 members and he was elected as the Founding President from 1963 to 1976. Over time, the society established close ties with the Chapter and the College of Ophthalmologists of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore (AMS). They also collaborated closely with regional fraternal bodies and brought several regional and global conferences to

Singapore. Today, the membership comprises over 240 ophthalmologists.

In 1964, Bob was elected President of SMA and had the unique honour of delivering the SMA Lecture – twice – in 1976 and 1995, an award reserved only for persons of eminence and distinction. In 1999, he was conferred SMA's highest honour, the Honorary Membership. In 1968, he presided over the third Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology Congress successfully held here with delegates coming from all over the world.

He retired from Government service in 1969, and for his contributions to the Government, he was among the first to be appointed honorary consultant to the Ministry of Health, alongside Profs Benjamin Sheares, Ernest Monteiro and Yeoh Ghim Seng.

Friendships were renewed in the 1960s when Bob and I were elected to the AMS Council, where we worked closely with the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies to advance Singapore's postgraduate specialty training programmes and our own higher examinations. I will always be grateful for the immense support he gave to me when he and I were Assistant Master and Master of AMS, respectively, from 1973 to 1975. It was he who proposed that Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime



minister, be conferred AMS' honorary fellowship. On the tenth anniversary of our young nation in 1975, Bob personally brought this to fruition at the tenth Singapore-Malaysia Congress of Medicine. In 1978, when AMS was invited to attend the Conference of Presidents of the British Commonwealth Colleges of Physicians in Glasgow, I was happy to witness Bob as master, AMS, and other presidents being conferred the College's Fellowship by Prof Tom Gibson, then president of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow.

His professional qualifications included MBBS (Bombay), 1949; DO (London), 1954; FRCS(Edin), 1959; FAMS, 1959; FACS, 1966; FRACS, 1973; FRACO, 1973; FRCPS(Glasg),1978; and FRCOphth, 1988.

Charity was another lifetime commitment, a passion Bob inherited from his parents, Dr and Mrs Loh Poon Lip. He led the Young Men's Christian Association, a Christian charity, from 1970, where he served wholeheartedly for over 20 years despite his busy professional schedule and thriving private practice. He was conferred the title President Emeritus in 1993. The Rotary Club was another charitable body which demanded his leadership. Thus, he was appointed president in 1976 and the district governor serving the region from 1991 to 1992.

For his dedicated commitment in service to the community, he was appointed by the Government in 1992 to lead and be the first president of the

newly restructured National Council of Social Service. For a full decade, he virtually gave his all in this national service to our fellowmen, especially the poor, disadvantaged and disabled, retiring only in 2002.

His enormous contributions to the public service were duly recognised by the award of numerous national honours, including the Public Service Medal in 1982; Public Service Star in 1991; Public Service Star (Bar) in 1996; and Meritorious Service Medal in 2002. He was appointed a Justice of Peace in 1989.

Sports had always been an important part in Bob's life. During his youthful years, he played badminton, table tennis and cricket in school. He excelled in tennis, becoming the medical school champion during his university days. In later years, to quote him: "the passion for golf prevailed over the years" and he achieved a hole-in-one in 1968. He served the golfing fraternity by being president of Singapore Island Country Club in 1979 for three years and travelling widely with his *kakis* (slang for friends) to play in leading golf courses around the world.

In Bob's book, *An Eye on Life*, he testified: "I've always been a Christian... and on retirement later, my realisation of how much I owed to God heightened my sense of fulfilment". I was much heartened when he told me from the hospital bed that over the last few years, despite having great difficulty in

walking, he had been conscientiously attending bible study fellowship. He was not only a man of faith, but also a family man – a devoted and loving husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather. He is survived by his dear wife Mary, sons Stephen and Andrew, daughter Pat, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Dr Robert Loh was a completely wonderful gentleman and an exemplary Singaporean. I'm sure all who knew him will be thankful for the eight decades of service he gave so unstintingly. ♦

Legend

1. Past Masters of AMS with the late President Wee Kim Wee
2. The fifth SMA Council (1964/1965) when Dr Robert Loh was President
3. Masters of AMS with the late President SR Nathan at AMS's Golden Anniversary 2007