

Citation of 1998 SMA Honorary Member, Dr Wong Heck Sing

Mr President, our Guest-of-Honour, Mr Moses Lee, 2nd Permanent Secretary for Health, Mrs Lee, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed with pride, honour and privilege that I prepare and deliver this citation of Dr Wong Heck Sing for the conferment of 1998 Singapore Medical Association's (SMA) Honorary Member.

I first came to know Dr Wong when I was a Member of the 5th Council of the College of Family Physicians in 1975, when he was then President. It was a period of learning for me, and I consider it a privilege to work under such a man who serves with humility and humbleness, yet with dignity and respect which he has brought to the College Presidency.

Dr Wong was born in Singapore in 1923, educated at St Andrew's School. He passed his "O" Level Cambridge Examination in 1939 with distinctions, but had to wait seven years before entering medical school in 1946. Many would have given up along the way, but not Dr Wong who, with persistence, perseverance and determination, survived and weathered the uncertainties, obstacles and hardships of the war years to achieve his ambition of becoming a doctor.

Before entering medical school, he was teaching English in a Chinese school for six months, did Pharmacy for one year at the British Dispensary, having been sent there by the Department of Pharmacy, King Edward VII College of Medicine where he was a pharmacy student. However, Pharmacy was not stimulating enough, and he applied to Raffles College to read Science. In December 1941, his studies were interrupted by the 2nd World War. During the war years, 1942 to 1945, Dr Wong became a farmer on Batam Island, planting and subsisting on sweet potatoes and tapioca.

In Batam, he was practising Medicine even before graduating as a doctor for there in Batam, he was treating war casualties with the knowledge and training which he had received from the Medical Auxiliary Services (MAS) when the war began.

When the war ended in 1945, he had the opportunity to operate a canteen for the Dutch POWS, and saved enough money for his medical education.

As a medical student he was appointed part-time demonstrator in Biochemistry from 1947 to 1948 and Anatomy from 1948 to 1949. The King Edward VII College of Medicine paid Dr Wong \$50 per month for these appointments. However, he had to take a loan to complete his final year of study.

Dr Wong had wanted to become an academic to teach medicine after graduation, but circumstances dictated otherwise, and he entered private practice in 1953 after housemanship. His clinic was outside the city, in the countryside, a kampong area surrounded by agricultural and poultry farms and plantations.



Dr Cheong conferring SMA Honorary Membership to Dr Wong Heck Sing

Dr Wong did not go into private practice to earn a fortune for very often he was paid in kind or with chickens and eggs or agricultural products instead of money. In spite of all these, he became a very successful and busy country GP, practising according to the famous dictum of Ambroise Pare, the famous 16th century French surgeon:-

"to cure, sometimes,
to relieve, often,
but to comfort, always."

Instead of devoting all his time and energy to his clinic only, Dr Wong took it upon himself to serve his community and did voluntary work. He was Honorary Doctor at Nanyang University from 1956 to 1960, attending to sick students from 6 pm to 10 pm, sacrificing family life and commitments. Dr Wong was also Honorary Physician to the Salvation Army Nursery Home 1956 to 1963. At that time there was a smallpox epidemic in Indonesia and the babies, some of whom were from the neighbouring islands, were at risk. Without hesitation, Dr Wong used his clinic's smallpox vaccines to vaccinate all the babies at the Salvation Army Nursery Home free of charge. Dr Wong was also Honorary Doctor to the Lee Kuo Chuan Home for the Aged, 1964 to 1970. His depth and breadth in medical practice then included adolescent medicine as he was also Honorary Physician to Boys' Town, 1956 to 1970. He even catered to the uniformed, when he was corps surgeon to the St John's Ambulance Brigade from 1956 to 1970. Education was even covered for he was the Vice-Chairman, Jalan Teck Whye Secondary School Advisory Committee, 1968 to 1971.

At the national level, Dr Wong also contributed dedicated services to his country. He served tirelessly at the Public Service Commission (PSC) from 1970 to mid-1973 as a Member, and then from mid-1973 to 1994 as Deputy Chairman, where he played a key role in recruiting and managing talented people in the civil service, and was also instrumental in the appointment and promotion of key personnel and selection of scholars. In addition, he was a member of the Singapore Telephone Board 1969 to 1971, and Legal Service Commission mid-1973 to 1994. Dr Wong also chaired the Ministry of Health's Committee for selection of part-time Honorary Consultants for government hospitals from 1974 to 1978. For his contributions and services to our nation and country, Dr Wong was awarded the Public Service Star (BBM) in 1983, and the Meritorious Service Medal (PJG) in 1989 by the Singapore Government.

In spite of the multitude of his various commitments, Dr Wong's faith and beliefs in Family Medicine never wavered. In the late sixties he travelled to Australia and sought the help of the Australian College of General Practitioners in setting up a similar college in Singapore, a task which included the introduction of the postgraduate diploma examination in Family Medicine. Dr Wong was Founder Vice-President (1971-1973), and President for 3 terms (1973-1975, 1975-1977 and 1983-1985) of the College of General Practitioners in Singapore.

Dr Wong was also actively involved with the world body of family doctors, WONCA (which stands for World Organisation of National Colleges and Academies) where he was member of the WONCA Executive Council from 1976 to 1978. During his term there he helped to build up a good working relationship between the Singapore College and the World Body.

Dr Wong always gives his best in advice, counsel and time whenever approached, and his views and thoughts on Family Medicine were much sought after. In 1976 the Singapore Medical Association invited him to deliver a paper on "Family Medicine in Singapore: Past, Present and Future". He also gave the First Sreenivasan Oration of the College of Family Physicians in 1978 titled "The Future Singapore General Practitioner" which provided the necessary ingredients and direction for the development of Family Medicine in Singapore. In 1997 Dr Wong was invited to deliver the 1997 SMA lecture "In Search of Future Role Models in Medicine". This lecture was favourably received and widely acclaimed, resulting in the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Medicine inviting him to deliver the first Medical Inspirational Lecture to medical students, the first of its kind in the whole university. In response to the 1997 SMA lecture, and I'm sure with unanimous approval from all of you, Mr President, Ladies and Gentleman, let me add another name to the list of Role Models in Medicine, that of Dr Wong Heck Sing, who has inspired us by his example and conduct, has a love of humanity, is highly skilled and knowledgeable and who has a broad perspective of life. These qualities are further enhanced by his ability to teach effectively, as he is well versed both in the art and science of medicine. Most of all, he has the necessary self-respect, which enables him to gain respect from others.

Having gone into private general practice very early in his career, Dr Wong did not have the opportunity, like his peers, to pursue and acquire multiple postgraduate degrees. In spite of this, academic colleges and professional organisations and bodies have recognised his skills, knowledge, depth, views and thoughts of medicine as can be seen by the fellowship awards and invitations to honorary memberships awarded to him. Dr Wong Heck Sing was admitted into the Academy of Medicine in Singapore in 1975, the same year the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners awarded him the honorary FRACGP. In 1980, he was awarded the FCGP by the College of Family Physicians in Singapore.

Now, even in his retirement years, Dr Wong continues to attend Continuing Medical Education (CME) meetings and lectures, sports new talent and nurtures young doctors and endeavours to create an environment for the betterment of Medicine in Singapore, setting a pace and example many a doctor should emulate.

Mr President, Ladies and Gentleman, I present for the conferment of the 1998 Singapore Medical Association Honorary Member, Dr Wong Heck Seng.

DR LIM LEAN HUAT
Vice-President
College of Family Physicians, Singapore