



A/Prof Lim delivering his citation at the SMA Annual Dinner 2013

# Citation for Emeritus Prof Robert Pho

By A/Prof Aymeric Lim

“**G**ray hair is a crown of splendour; it is attained by a righteous life.”

– Proverbs 16:31

Prof Pho was born in 1940 in Papua New Guinea. He obtained his basic MBBS from the University of Sydney in 1966, Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1972, and MD from the University of Sydney in 1999 at the age of 59 years. He joined the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1974, became a full professor in 1984 and is still practicing there today. He is married to Ley Koon and has three children.

It is a great privilege presenting Emeritus Prof Robert Pho, Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NUS; and Emeritus Consultant, Department of Hand and Reconstructive Microsurgery, National University Hospital (NUH) for the conferment of Honorary Membership of SMA.

He is my teacher.

One of the first things he told an already-confused registrar in 1995 was: “the fingertip is your laboratory”.

He meant for amputated fingertips to be sliced, stained, reconstructed, and the contents analysed. Five different types of sensory cells, a complex pressure distribution system, two arterial circulatory systems, a complex bone and tendon anatomy, in short, the eye of touch.

There is no other surgeon who has thought about the fingertip this way, with curiosity, depth, persistence, and with imagination. And this characterises the way that he has approached all research.

Keynote addresses and honorary memberships all over the world, and more than 100 publications are testament to a research career that has led to groundbreaking work in microsurgical tissue transfers, congenital anomalies, muscle innervation and transplantation, upper limb prostheses, and musculoskeletal tumours. For example, in 1991, with Prof V P Kumar, he had already started work into the technology that would lead to the robotic limbs we see today.

No other surgeon teaches Surgery like he does. There was another reason he wanted to draw our attention to the fingertip – he wanted his trainees to develop

Photo: SMA

**“He was one of the first few surgeons in Singapore to do a total hip arthroplasty and could easily have left hospital practice. But he stayed, for the academic work and for the poorer patients who would not have been able to afford a world-class surgeon to cure their tumours.”**

refined techniques: “you have to feel, feedback from the fingertips”; he wanted us to hold our scalpels like pens and brushes. Any deviation from this code would lead to a rap on the fingers.

He is a very demanding teacher. Late in my training, he once took me through a metacarpal fracture. I prepared to do the standard incision, he asked me why. I gave the standard answer and got a 30-minute admonishment for not thinking deeply. It was only after the surgery was over that I realised that he had let me continue to hold the scalpel.

The operating theatre is a sacred place for Prof Pho and this can be terrifying for the more junior staff who sometimes behave as if it is an Inca temple where human sacrifice is practised. The scoldings are frequent and discipline enforced.

It was only later that I realised that he was teaching not only the technique but the art of Surgery, and was trying to instil in young surgeons a sense of the enormous responsibility that comes with applying knife to a patient for healing.

This sense of professionalism was evident in wards and clinics, where strict discipline was allied with a unique bedside manner that found its deepest and best expressions with his cancer patients. For it is as a musculoskeletal cancer surgeon that Prof Pho is probably best known in the world.

He never talks about money in an improper way; he always deals with the many second and third opinions and surgeries that come to him from both outside and within the hospital with dignity and propriety.

He was able to apply this professional rigour to leadership, having successfully set up the departments of Hand Surgery in Singapore General Hospital (SGH), then NUH in 1991, and the Experimental Surgery Unit, Ministry of Health in the Outram campus. He was also the head of the University Department of Orthopaedic Surgery in SGH from 1986 to 1988.

These departments were characterised by strict discipline, hard work, active teaching and a high research output, which is how departments should be run.

There is an authority to his wisdom and uncompromising approach to all things. There was a crisis in NUH once. A clinical review had led to some coming up with excuses and blaming of the system. It was Prof Pho who had the final word: “When a surgeon accepts a patient for treatment, he also accepts full responsibility for not just his work, but for all the processes involved. He is the final one accountable.”

It is perhaps this heightened sense of duty that has given him the strength to stay in the public sector all his life. He was one of the first few surgeons in Singapore to do a total hip arthroplasty and could easily have left hospital practice. But he stayed, for the academic work and for the poorer patients who would not have been able to afford a world-class surgeon to cure their tumours.

And it is the treasures that Prof Pho has laid up for himself that make him deserving of this honour, not “where moth and rust destroy”, but in four generations of surgeons, a world-class specialty and patients who are alive and walking today, their limbs intact. **SMA**