

Dr Yeoh Seang Aun

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By Dr Yeoh Swee Choo, Dr Yeoh Teong Keat, Dr Jen Wei Ying, Jen Jian Ping and Jen Jian Wen



The original version of this eulogy was delivered by Dr Yeoh's children and grandchildren at the Church of St Ignatius on 25 May 2013.

Dad was born in 1920 in Telok Anson, a small town near Ipoh. There were 11 children in the family and he was the youngest son. When he was growing up in Ipoh, his eldest sister had to make curry with salted fish bones because they simply could not afford the meatier pieces. Dad was allowed to attend Anglo-Chinese School in Telok Anson when a generous aunt provided him with money for textbooks and school uniforms. In order to keep his shoes clean, he tied their shoelaces together, hung them around his neck and walked barefoot to school. As there was no electricity at home, he would study by the light of fireflies in a jar. He wept only once, when he was pushed into second place in class. Later, he obtained his secondary education at St Michael's Institution in Ipoh, where he learned French, memorised Catholic litanies and read Shakespeare.

Before World War II, with the support of his elder brother and a scholarship, Dad came to Singapore to read Dentistry. In the oral records of the National Archives, you can hear him recall the vastness of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* darkening his horizon. Both ships were sunk off the east coast of Malaya a few days later in December 1941.

Medical school during WWII

The first death among medical students in Singapore occurred (caused by Japanese shelling) at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), and his body was brought back to Sepoy Lines. The students were determined that he would have a decent burial in the trenches that had been dug around the College of Medicine Building. While they were preparing the grave, more students were killed by Japanese shelling, but Dad survived as he had been digging at the bottom of the trench.

After the British surrendered, it was deemed unsafe for young Chinese males to remain in Singapore. With some difficulty, a permit was obtained for several students to return to Malaya. The party comprised a few bicycles with a rider and pillion rider each, with the last bike carrying a tin of biscuits. Unfortunately, Dad had a Raleigh bike – one of those you had to pedal continuously. Along the way back to Malaya, they had terrifying encounters with Japanese troops and witnessed the atrocities of war. Dad cycled all the way to Kuala Lumpur, where he joined his family and spent the rest of the war weighing out rice rations.

Following the surrender of the Japanese, he returned to Singapore with a double scholarship to read Medicine and Dentistry. Eventually, he gave up Dentistry, to the dismay of his dental professor, to pursue solely Medicine. He graduated with MBBS from the University of Malaya (Singapore) in 1951.

His family

Dad first set eyes on Mum (Dr Tan Joo Seang) when she participated in the freshers' beauty parade. She won, of course. Mount Faber was the romantic destination of the day, and he took Mum up on his 50cc motorbike, only to have the engine give up – she promised not to tell! He found time to excel in courtship and academia, captained football, rugby and hockey teams, and played rugby for Singapore.

They got married soon after Mum graduated towards the end of 1952 – but not only because of the tax rebate for spouses in that year. Swee Choo, their first child, arrived when they were living in Dunearn Road Hostel, which was free accommodation for the warden. Soon after their son,

Tiong Keat was born, Dad left for Edinburgh on a two-year scholarship to pursue his Membership of the Royal Colleges of Physicians (MRCP). There, an Indian doctor persuaded him to sit for the MRCP, which he did within three months of his arrival, and passed!

His calling

Tuberculosis (TB) was a great scourge in the 1950s and 60s. Inspired by his brother who had TB peritonitis, Dad found his calling as a chest physician.

Dr Yeoh Teong Keat remembers...

One of my earliest memories was of Dad stopping at the scene of an accident while the young family was out on a drive. He parked the car far away from the accident scene so that we could not see the injured, then got out of the car to render aid. We waited anxiously in the car as he helped the emergency workers. When he finally returned to the car, there was blood on his arms, but he did not describe the details, which may have been too gruesome for our young and tender ears. There were proud moments in his career as a doctor, and I believe this was one of them. He wanted to help people whenever he could. He was at his happiest at TTSH, where he was a consultant for many years.

He was my role model, and as a child, I idolised him. I would occasionally follow him on rounds at TTSH. He really enjoyed his work, and you could sense the satisfaction in his gentle bedside manner. Even while holidaying at St John's Island, where there was a ward for TB patients and another for opium addicts then, Dad would take it upon himself to visit the patients there.

He was a senior member of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore. Together with K Shanmugaratnam, Wong Hock Boon, Seah Cheng Siang and the Academy's Council, he helped to set up the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies. After his work at TTSH, he was Deputy Director of Medical Services at the Ministry of Health, where he was steadfast in strengthening primary healthcare while overseeing all the government hospitals.

When he retired, his colleagues organised a huge party of some 50 tables. He was most touched by a table of amahs from TTSH. While his heart was in public Medicine, he did enter a busy private practice.

Extracurricular activities and health issues

Dad enjoyed socialising and had many friends in various circles. His favourite pastimes included gin rummy, golf, and doing charity work at the Rotary Club. In 1981, at the age of 61, he suffered a myocardial infarction. While golfing one day, he thought he was having a heart attack on the eighth hole, but ever courteous, he completed the ninth hole, before driving himself home, showered and then woke Choo. He had suffered a large infarct, and Prof Chia

Boon Lock told him bluntly that he would perish if he did not undergo a coronary bypass surgery. The operation was done in Sydney by Victor Chang, and his new vessels lasted more than 30 years. After the operation, he recovered well enough to return to work and golf.

In 2006, he had a subdural haematoma drained when he was 87 years old. The operation was complicated by a stormy and protracted postoperative course that was beset by multiple complications over a period of three months. He recovered well enough to ambulate, and had a reasonable quality of life. He also survived long enough to realise his desire to see his grandson, Jian Ping, graduate a few days before his passing.

Dr Jen Wei Ying remembers...

Kongs, you were my guardian, my safe harbour, my comforter. You never said much, but you never needed to because you were always there, perched at the edge of my bed, gently patting my shoulder. Thank you for being our second daddy. For teaching me to cycle, for tirelessly driving my brothers (Jian Ping and Jian Wen) and me around at all hours, for waking up every morning without fail to accompany us as we waited for the school bus, for teaching me how to play blackjack, gin rummy and poker, and how to clean my friends out. And I owe my penmanship to you.

Your kindness knew no bounds. You selflessly denied yourself all the time, so that we could have an extra portion. You were the peacemaker, bringing my brothers and me together, even when your health started failing you. You never had a bad word to say about anybody.

Kongs, we love you more than words could ever say. You leave a gaping void in our lives and we will miss you so, so much. But I know you're getting a home ready for us all, and will be at the door waiting with that smile when our time comes. Rest well now, Kongs. Don't worry about Ahma, Mum or Koo Koo. We'll take care of them for you. Goodbye Kongs. We love you.

He was a doting husband, father and grandfather. He deferred to Mum, but made the big decisions and stood firm. He was never selfish, sacrificing the tastiest morsels for all his family. Gentle, patient, respected, loved, and invariably courteous, he had a long and productive life. He was 92 years old when he died, and outlived many of his colleagues and friends. He overcame huge obstacles in life, exploiting his natural intellect with sheer hard work. **SMA**

Dr Yeoh Swee Choo is an obstetrician and gynaecologist. Dr Yeoh Tiong Keat is a cardiologist living in Seattle. Dr Jen Wei Ying graduated in Medicine from Oxford University in 2012, and is presently a house officer (and resident in Medicine) in the Department of Medicine, National University Hospital. Jen Jian Ping is currently in his fourth year, reading Medicine at Oxford University. Jen Jian Wen is in his first year at Monash University, pursuing a degree in Commerce.