



Prof Wong (right) with Prof Lim at the opening ceremony of 25th Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology Congress, held in Beijing in September 2010

Arthur Lim: Inspiration, Perfection and Fear

By Prof Wong Tien Yin

Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC) and Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School launched the Arthur Lim Professorship in Ophthalmology at a ceremony held at The Academia on 20 January 2014. (Turn to page 24 to read a speech delivered by Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, who was the Guest of Honour at the event.)

In the following article, Prof Wong pays tribute to his mentor Prof Arthur Lim.

Inspiration

I remember with clarity that exactly 20 years ago, I received a telephone call to meet Prof Arthur Lim at the then newly set up SNEC. I was a young, first year medical officer working in a polyclinic, and was still deciding on a career in General Medicine, General Surgery or Cardiology. I had no previous strong inclination to do Ophthalmology, and had not prepared myself in medical school during the short rotation with either additional electives or research projects to be considered a competitive candidate for Ophthalmology residency (or traineeship, as it was called then).

I was to meet Prof Lim in a small room at the SNEC "VIP suite", which was meant, as I understood, for ministers and other prominent patients. I arrived early and waited nervously for him. In the room were two young ophthalmologists, Vivian Balakrishnan and Chan Wing Kwong – the former would go on to sterling careers in Ophthalmology, healthcare and politics, while the latter

became a senior ophthalmologist who would play a significant leadership role in SNEC before entering a highly successful private practice. We chatted, and they spoke to me about the excitement and buzz in SNEC, its vision and the unlimited opportunities available. This was way before Singapore aspired to be a global city, and subsequently became a powerhouse in healthcare and biomedical sciences in the region.

Prof Lim entered, quickly introduced himself and went straight to the point – a discussion on his grand vision for Ophthalmology in Singapore and an invitation to consider being part of this journey. I recall the sense of mission and raw energy I felt in the room, and I believed him. I have no idea how many young doctors he spoke to after me, but I do know that many of the best medical students were attracted to Ophthalmology because of his leadership and charisma in those early years. Many of them, like Donald Tan and Ang Chong Lye, have given a quarter of a century to public service in SNEC, the National University of Singapore (NUS), and Ophthalmology.

Perfection and fear

As a young resident, there were two particularly memorable aspects of training in SNEC. One was an overarching sense of perfection and the other was a fear of not meeting this exacting standard. There was little room for mistakes. Prof Lim used to remind us that "a patient's

eye is not for experimentation”, and he introduced many of the quality control processes and audit that are now considered routine in our hospitals. We were repeatedly warned by seniors that some mistakes, such as missing proliferative disease in diabetic retinopathy, would not be tolerated.

On Wednesday afternoons, everyone was expected to be present and punctual for the professor’s teaching round. We prepared our cases as if they were for our final examinations, and then waited patiently for Prof Lim to show up, relying on the nursing officer in charge to give us ample warning of his arrival. He would come in, examine the patient, assign one of us to do the examination after he was finished, and ask the unfortunate resident a series of questions. Silently, the other residents would listen attentively to his insights and observe his approach, which were consistent over the years, and his answers became our answers, drilled into our heads. This would continue week after week and year after year, and by the time we took our FRCS examinations, most of us were ready for the most demanding examiners. Several residents, such as Lim Tock Han, Benjamin Seet and Edmund Wong, took home the Gold Medal from the FRCS (Edinburgh) examination. All of them remain in public service in leadership positions.

Like Sir Alex Ferguson

Arthur was tough, demanding and unforgiving. Some people have likened Arthur Lim to Lee Kuan Yew, but I prefer to think of him as an Alex Ferguson. Arthur extracted the best from his team, but any team member who did not perform would no longer be part of his plans. In that sense, Arthur was also a polarising figure who had many detractors. For example, while a group of young ophthalmologists from the former Department of Ophthalmology at Singapore General Hospital was handpicked to join the new SNEC under Arthur, others were disenfranchised and marginalised. Some senior ophthalmologists in his era who could not agree with his policy and methods eventually left for private practice early on. There was unhappiness that a new breakthrough technique in cataract surgery (phacoemulsification) was introduced in SNEC almost a decade after it was widely practised in the US and other parts of Asia. To Arthur, a conservative and proven approach to surgery was important, as emphasised in his motto, “a patient’s eye is not for experimentation”.

Arthur’s vision and legacy

Most of all, Arthur provided a vision for the future that would be fulfilled many years later. SNEC will celebrate its 25th anniversary next year. It is now one of the highest-volume ambulatory eye centres in the Asia Pacific, managing 50% of public sector eye care workload and 50% of Singapore’s subsidised cataract surgeries. SNEC has more than 70 ophthalmologists, and has trained hundreds of residents and fellows both locally and internationally.

In 1997, years before biomedical research became a core engine of Singapore’s economy and five years before the formation of the Agency for Science, Technology and Research and Biopolis, Arthur started a major research programme and formed a research institute, the Singapore Eye Research Institute (SERI), within a hospital environment. To do this, he had to pull in funding and resources from NUS and the Ministry of Health. He saw the need for an academic environment in SNEC before the conceptualisation of academic medical centres. SERI is now recognised as a global centre of excellence in eye research. He also started a trend of nurturing clinician-scientists and a group of MD-PhDs. One of Arthur’s first clinician-scientist with an MD-PhD, Chew Sek Jin started a myopia research programme in the early 2000s. Sek Jin was the first Director of SERI but sadly, he passed away in 1999. 20 years later, the fruits of that research are now apparent – atropine eyedrops, tested and proven in clinical trials, are now widely used in children to prevent myopia progression. The current Director of SERI, Aung Tin, is also an MD-PhD, and his team was the first to discover genes that may be implicated in angle closure glaucoma, a form of glaucoma that is more prevalent in Asians. These successes and breakthroughs are a testament to Arthur’s vision two decades prior.

Among his many other contributions and achievements, Arthur was the youngest ever President of SMA. He continues to be the President of the Alumni Association.

Singapore Medicine in general, Ophthalmology in particular, has benefited from Arthur Lim’s legacy. It is to honour this legacy that the Arthur Lim Professorship is created. **SMA**



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About the Arthur Lim Professorship

To fund this professorship, SNEC will be donating \$2.5 million from their Health Research Endowment Fund, and this will be matched dollar-for-dollar by the Ministry of Education through Duke-NUS. The professorship will be given to outstanding clinicians and researchers who demonstrate academic leadership in medical education and promote the advancement of new frontiers in Medicine.

If you would like to make a donation, please contact Ms Wong Peak Sha (Academic Clinical Program Development Manager, SNEC) at email: wong.peak.sha@sneec.com.sg or tel: 6322 9591.