



In Memory of Prof Arthur Lim

Text by Prof Wong Tien Yin
Photos by Singapore National Eye Centre



Prof Lim receiving the Singapore National Eye Centre International Gold Medal from then Singapore President S R Nathan in 2000

80 YEARS is a short time. Some of us will live longer than Prof Arthur Lim, but few can ever claim to have lived such a full and impactful life. 80 years was enough time for him to leave a powerful and indelible mark on Ophthalmology, Medicine, and Singapore society.

As doctors, we all have the unique opportunity to care for our patients, and we appreciate our ability to impact hundreds and probably thousands of patients' lives over the course of our careers. Prof Lim, however, would only talk about impacting *millions* of patients. And he did just that. Over his career, he revolutionised how Ophthalmology, a small specialty in Singapore and most of Asia, could be brought from third world to first. Through his leadership, teaching, training, and inspiring others, he brought vision to millions of patients throughout China and Asia.

Prof Lim was a visionary. He shared his vision with zeal and it was not easy to suppress his enthusiasm. He was already "in China" and "working with the Chinese", way before engagement with China became in vogue. When he set up Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC) almost 25 years ago, he insisted on videoing every single operation, thus starting the process of exacting quality control methods to local

Medicine. This was seen by his critics as unnecessary and tyrannical, but with the benefit of hindsight, is now accepted as standard practice. This quality control has elevated Singapore Medicine's reputation near and far.

Prof Lim was larger than life. His love for the arts is well known, and he was both an avid collector and a prolific painter. To visit his clinic was to experience an art collection. When Prof Lim entertained, he would do so without restraint. There was always good food and wine, and lots of entertainment. We would marvel at how he brought diverse people together. Often there was no agenda – a dinner invitation from Prof Lim did not need one – he was simply building and nurturing friendships that would last his lifetime.

Of course, it was not always smooth sailing, and there were challenges. His plans to set up SNEC met with fierce resistance from senior ophthalmologists from both Singapore General Hospital and National University Hospital. While he handpicked and mentored a whole generation of young ophthalmologists, several could not continue his vision and work. One of his early trainees, Dr Chew Sek Jin, a gold medallist in the FRCS (Edinburgh) examination with a PhD from The Rockefeller University in the US, was supposed





Prof Lim (first from left) with then Minister for Health Mr Lim Hng Kiang (second from right) during the Singapore Eye Research Institute International's official opening in 2001



Prof Lim giving a speech as SNEC's first medical director when it opened in 1991

to helm the Singapore Eye Research Institute (SERI), which Prof Lim founded. Sek Jin, however, passed away from brain cancer early in his career. Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, who took over from Prof Lim as the second Medical Director of SNEC, was invited to take on a career in politics and now serves as a Cabinet minister.

Most importantly, it was never about personal gain. Not many of us are aware that Prof Lim did not take a salary while he was the Medical Director of SNEC. He actually gave money regularly to several of his fellow doctors who had fallen on hard times.

In the last week of his life, I visited him twice in his home. Although he was physically weak and in pain, his mind remained sharp, and he remained focused on how we could do more for Ophthalmology and Medicine. He would ask, "How is SNEC doing?" and "We must move fast." In the evening before he passed away, I sensed an inner peace. He declared, "I did all I wanted, and leave you now to carry on my vision." He was ready for his death. He was not depressed; he did not feel there was time to feel depressed. He was not angry, regretful nor resentful. He was satisfied and it was time to leave. 80 years of a wonderful, fulfilling, and impactful life.

As to his contributions to Ophthalmology, others say it much better than me.

"On behalf of APAO, I would like to express our deepest sadness and heartfelt condolences for the passing away of Prof Arthur Lim, our former President and Secretary-General, and perhaps more importantly the greatest leader and teacher for several generations of ophthalmologists in the Asia-Pacific region. Without Prof Lim, APAO would certainly not have grown and matured in the way it has. His immense impact on Ophthalmology has extended well beyond our region. Prof Lim will forever live in the depths of our heart as a great role model, and his very positive influence will endure for many more generations to come."

- Prof Clement CY Tham, Secretary-General and Chief Executive Officer, Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology (APAO)

"I was greatly saddened of Arthur's death. I knew Arthur for so many years and was well aware of the great debt owed to him by so many people. As you know neither SNEC nor SERI would have been in existence without his foresight and his energy in promoting world-class Ophthalmology in Singapore. He will be missed by many."

- Prof Wallace Foulds, Emeritus Professor and Chair, Tennant Institute of Ophthalmology, University of Glasglow

"Arthur Lim's passing away marks the end of a chapter in the evolution of Ophthalmology in the Asia-Pacific region. More than any individual, Arthur contributed in many, many ways over an extraordinary period of time to the structure and effective functioning of our wonderful branch of Medicine in this part of the world. His influence will endure. This landmark gives us the opportunity for pause and reflection."

- Prof Ivan Goldberg, former President of the World Glaucoma Association, University of Sydney

"On behalf of the Zhongshan Ophthalmic Center in China, I would like to express my deepest condolences to the family on the passing of the esteemed Prof Arthur Lim Siew Ming, who is widely known as the Father of Ophthalmology in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Prof Lim will be remembered as a great leader who helped to introduce the advanced cataract surgical techniques to China which has benefit millions of patients. The immense impact and influence Prof Lim has bestowed on Ophthalmology will endure forever."

- Prof Yizhi Liu, Director, Zhongshan Ophthalmic Center, China

