

# A Glimpse into the Past

## MEDICINE IN SINGAPORE (PART 6)

### 1930S TO 1940S: MORE STUDENT ANTICS AND MEMORIES

*This is the sixth instalment of a series on the history of medicine in Singapore.*

In 1936, Dr JC Tull was succeeded as Professor of Pathology by Dr JA Cowan, who held the position briefly until 1937. Dr HO Hopkins was the next Professor, and he held the position from 1937 to 1941. In 1938, the Dental Clinic Building was completed at the present site of the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) and served as a teaching department. At around the same time, the Dental School comprised one professor (EK Tratman), one lecturer (JW Softley), two tutors in dental surgery (Henley Wong and Tay Teck Eng) and one instructor in dental mechanics (GH Stephens). Tan Sri Dr Tay later became Chairman of the Council of the University of Singapore and the Singapore Cancer Society. In preparation for the war, a maxillofacial unit was set up at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital (KKH).

In 1936, Col (Dr) John William Scharff was appointed Lecturer in Public Health and he introduced a health and sanitary survey of rural villages as part of the curriculum. In 1937, doctors were just beginning to understand the aetiology of cardiac beriberi (a vitamin B1 deficiency). Prof ES Monteiro described how thiamine chloride was first used in Singapore as a cure and as proof of the aetiology.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Ng Ek Khiam described some of his fellow students in the late 1930s.<sup>2</sup> "I remember a string of names: Baptist, Ding Ee, Siew Choh, Oon Teik, Danasamy, Parampalam, Lum Choon, Duriaretnam and Frank Dourado, who played the funeral march on his flute when conducted to the bath tub for the immersion ceremony in scented water. I was quartered at Room 33 of the then Federated Malay States Hostel (FMS Hostel) on top of a hill, facing the sisters' quarters. Japanese telescopes were selling at ten cents apiece and most students were equipped with one. I came to the College with a reputation as a sportsman, but could not do much because I had a knee injury, which took me in and out of hospital. During one of these hospital episodes, just before I was put under traction for a year, I loved to wander from room to room to visit the other patients, especially

fellow students. One fine day, I came upon a final year medical student whom I shall not identify for obvious reasons. Mournfully, he told me that another capable final year student had kindly done a circumcision for him, but that septicaemia had set in. Hence, despite the loss of face, he had to make a clean breast of things to the professor, who had ordered hospitalisation to avoid possible amputation. This unfortunate student was a very old friend of mine, against whom I had played in inter-school games in North Malaya. Our schools were 'enemies' but personally, we were good friends. How could I leave him alone to let fearful self-pity eat into his very soul? So filled with love and charity, I used to pay him regular visits to cheer him up with funny stories. But even Bob Hope would have run out of funny stories, so my stories graduated to the sublime. I showed him pin-ups and debauched him with 'nice' stories. You can picture a man tensed with passion. You can picture a man tensed with pain. But can you picture a man tensed with both?"

Based on a tongue-in-cheek account<sup>3</sup> given by Dr Chee Phui Hung (who was among the first batch of MBBS graduands from the University of Malaya, Singapore), medical and dental students were a rambunctious lot in the 1930s: "We remember the good old days



when we sang songs to 'dirty' lyrics, got drunk on a potent cocktail of gin, whisky, brandy and beer from the Kay-Mouat cup after an inter-college victory, smelled the nurses when we advanced from morbid anatomy classes to clinics, gambled the night away in hostel corridors and suffered 'air raids' when our rooms were turned upside down. We recall too, getting pelted by rotten eggs in the former FMS Hostel's quadrangle, hopping on to goucho's cowboy lorry to 'barrack' at our Raffles College counterparts throughout the year; conducting panty raids at Eusoff Hall, the ladies hostel; dowsing the chief medical officer when he dared to invade the hostel and defying the police with bugle calls." Upon graduation, Dr Chee worked briefly in the Department of Bacteriology of the Faculty of Medicine before going into private practice. In his later years, Dr Chee devoted his time to the Alumni Association, where he was known as "the Agong" (apparently in reference to him being the "King of Ragers").

Dr JJ Murugasu was in the second batch of students after the war. He entered Tan Tock Seng Hostel in October 1946 and later transferred to FMS Hostel. This was how Dr Murugasu described daily life as a student.<sup>4</sup> "Every morning, the College provided transport in the form of a military truck driven by a fellow called ['goucho'] because he had a big hat. It was the truck that took us first to Holne Chase to pick up the girls, then to Raffles College for physics and chemistry lectures. In the afternoon, we had biology at the College of Medicine Building before returning to our hostel. When I came back to our third floor room, I would always announce my arrival by throwing my shoes up in the air so that they landed noisily on the wooden floor. Seah Cheng Siang, who stayed in the room below, eventually got fed up and bought a big wooden pole. This, he banged on the ceiling to tell me to stop making so much noise."

In 1964, Dr Omar bin Hamid wrote an account of what life was like

for "northerners" who came to the College of Medicine in Singapore in the late 1930s.<sup>5</sup> "The first pioneers from the north were Salma and Sutan. Through no fault of his own, (Sutan) took the slow boat to graduation, and if the College had issued any decorations, he certainly would have been awarded the Long Service Medal. Bakar was another stalwart at games, but whenever he scored wide off the goal, he would swear as angrily as he would throw a rotten mah-jong card. In academic studies, these boys took things easy. Why worry! They had a good scholarship and there was a whole year to relax, and they could always do some frantic reading just before the exam. But to satisfy their conscience, they carried Jamieson with them to the picture hall or whenever they patronised the mee stall behind the ronggeng stage at Happy World. Among themselves, they formed the Radio Club. They just parked themselves around the radiogram in Harrower Hall after dinner with Gray's or Samson Wright's on their laps ostensibly with the idea of doing some earnest reading. Bakar and I were constant partners in the labs, just because nobody else wanted to partner us. Both of us occasionally slipped out of the gynaecology lectures at KKH after the attendance had been taken, in order to go to the pictures at the Rex Theatre close by. I also achieved the record of being the only student in the history of the College to be asked by Dr Balasingam to repeat the one-month post mortem course just because I was honest enough not to copy the post mortem notes from the technician, Nalpon, as so many others did. The College was a real melting pot to which came students

with different backgrounds, outlooks and eccentricities. There were people who had come from the wilderness and there were city folks who thought that *padi* grew on trees. There were people with plenty of dollars and other[s] with plenty of sense. There were sloppy students and those who dressed with sartorial correctness. There were clowns and fuddy-duddies, and there were paragons of virtue and others who were a little salacious, and there were adventurers, ideologists, romanticists and students. This motley crowd melted in the Medical College Union (which was re-formed in 1922 from the Student's Recreation Club) pot, out of which emerged the good Alumni we all are today." ♦

## PROFILE



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A/Prof Cuthbert Teo is trained as a forensic pathologist. The views expressed in the above article are his personal opinions, and do not represent those of his employer.

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