

A Glimpse into the Past

MEDICINE IN SINGAPORE (PART 8)

FEBRUARY 1942 TO SEPTEMBER 1945: THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION YEARS

This is the eighth instalment of a series on the history of medicine in Singapore



The medical school at the College of Medicine was closed by the Japanese on 16 February 1942 and was used as the base for the Japanese Army Medical Corps to receive war casualties. The local hospital's doctors and dentists were allowed to hold examinations for 22 medical and seven dental students, who received diplomas issued by the Japanese Military Administration. The students later dispersed; some set off homeward and others went to strike out and make a living for themselves.

Dr Oon Chiew Seng wrote in the 1994/1995 Alumni Association

Annual Report: "Within minutes (of bombs dropping in Singapore), the principal Dr George Allen rang to inform us of the outbreak of war. At that moment, most of us did not appreciate the impact of the news, though some did break down. All classes at the College were suspended. Some who could return home did. They were mostly from Raffles College. The rest of us, mostly medical students, joined the Auxiliary Medical Service stationed at the [Kandang Kerbau Hospital]. The only duty I can recall doing was rolling bandages in the company of some expatriate wives. As the days went by, with reports of the fall of

Penang and Northern Malaya, some went to stay with friends and only a few of us were left in Holne Chase. I was lucky to have two brothers who insisted that I leave Singapore with their families – two women and eight children. We left Singapore on 6 February at almost midnight and arrived in Bombay a week later."

The students who went homeward up-country had to obtain written permission from the Japanese High Command. A group of 13 students led by Aziz Omar (later Dato Dr) went to the Municipal building and obtained group permits. An account of their return to Penang

was written by Dr Cheong Mow Lum in 1973:¹ "[W]e learned that the Japanese were going to take over the [General Hospital] for the use of their sick and wounded, and we were to leave immediately. ... The hospital compound was full of cars and bicycles, while inside the nurses' hostel, all sorts of tinned food could be found. We helped ourselves to some of the tinned food and filled a few small gunny sacks with rice and sugar. I helped myself to a Hercules bicycle and two of the others did the same. ... The 13 of us ... were all set to walk back to our homes. ... We ... saw many people, both old and young, slowly making their way in the direction of Orchard Road, with a few Japanese soldiers *kuariing* (herding) them along...with fixed bayonets... We were stopped a number of times by soldiers, but on inspecting the pass issued to us by the Military Headquarters, we were allowed to get on our way. This was the big round up that took place in Singapore shortly after the surrender in which hundreds of Singaporeans were picked out by hooded informers and were taken away and shot. We did not realise how lucky we were then ... On the Singapore side of the Causeway, the huts built by the British were by then occupied by Japanese guards. To cross the Causeway, we had to pass this guard house. In front of the huts, we saw two Chinese men tied to a lamp post with ropes. We came to a halt here not knowing what to do next. Hean Phek and Chung Hian slowly walked to the post to see the officer-in-charge. It was about half an hour later before they emerged. ... We were to follow them to the huts. ... we are going to be shot we thought to ourselves. However, to our great relief, we were ordered to clear up all the rubbish, which had been left there by the British ... after which we were told we could proceed on our way. As [we] were walking along the Causeway, we could see a few dead bodies, with their hands tied behind them, floating in the water. ... There was another guard post at the JP end ... However, to our surprise, we were given a cordial reception by the soldiers on duty here and offered Japanese tea under a tent. After a series of bows to our kind soldiers we hurried away to the town centre. ... We reached Kulai, about 17 miles

away from Johore Bahru, in the afternoon. Some Japanese soldiers were billeted in the railway quarters ... Chung Hian explained to them by writing in Chinese characters on paper who we were and what we were doing there ... the next day a train with a number of empty wagons came along and we were told to get into one of them. After a lot of bowing and profuse thanks to our kind hosts, we scrambled on board ... at Bukit Mertajam where we quickly jumped off the train. From here we made our way, this time truly on foot, to Butterworth beach, where there were a number of sampans waiting to ferry us across the channel to Penang Island. ...When the Japanese opened the Medical College in Malacca, a couple of us got admitted there. Instead of learning medicine there, most of those who went learned Nippon Seishin (the Japanese spirit) instead. All 13 of us returned to College in June 1946. Only one did not complete his dental studies. Tan Boon Teong left after a few months and proceeded to Australia where he qualified as a chartered accountant. Lim Khoon Huat qualified as a doctor and became a city health officer in Penang. ... The whereabouts of the other 11 are as follows:

1. Dr Stanley Keong Hean Peck, State Dental Director, Penang.
2. Dr Tai Yen Hooi, Director of Dental Services, Ministry of Health, Kuala Lumpur.
3. Dr Chee Phui Hung, private practitioner, Singapore.
4. Dr Lee Seng Guan, Professor of Restorative Dentistry, University of Malaya.
5. Dr Wong Poh Lam, ophthalmologist, emigrated to Australia.
6. Dato Dr Wee Khoo Hock, private practitioner, Kota Bahru, Kelantan.
7. Dr Michael Kheong Hean Kin, Deputy Director of Dental Services, Singapore.
8. Dato Dr Lim Kee Jin, consultant physician, [General Hospital] (GH), Johore Bahru.
9. Dr Chong Chung Hian, former gynaecologist and Director of



PROFILE

TEXT BY

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Medical Services, Sarawak; now with [World Health Organization] in Korea.

10. Dr Sin Ban Seng, private practitioner, Penang.
11. Dr Cheong Mow Lum, dental specialist, Bukit Mertajam."

Later, the Japanese used the College of Medicine Building (COMB) as a serum and vaccine institute. In April 1943, the Japanese Military Administration established The Marai Ika Daigaku (Syonan Medical College) at the Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) (then renamed Hakuai Byoin, Syonan). Thus, TTSH can rightly claim to be the Singapore's Medical College briefly. When the Syonan Medical College first opened, all former students of the King Edward VII College of Medicine were accepted, and a total of about 200 students became Ika Daigakusei (medical students): 100 from Malaya and Singapore, and 100 from Indonesia, nearly all from Sumatra. There were only two teachers – a primary school teacher named Ozaki and a physical instructor named Kameyama. Students did not learn anything about medicine,

but were instead taught how to sing the Umi Yukaba (Seafaring) and Kimigayo (national anthem of Japan), how to bow deeply in the direction of the Imperial Palace in Japan and physical exercises. [The Umi Yukaba is a solemn *gunka* or military song. It was initially a song composed in 1880 to be used for naval ceremonies. The words were the military's oath of loyalty to the Emperor.] Even then, there was an attempt to start ragging, but this was apparently quickly given up because the Dutch-speaking Sumatran students objected to it with razors drawn.

The Japanese then shifted the Medical School to Malacca GH in February 1944, where it functioned (with all Japanese teachers) till the end of the Japanese Occupation in September 1945.² The warden of the Medical College in Malacca was Dr Keigo Shima, who was a surgeon and said to be a fine gentleman who never raised his hand to anyone. Dr Shima was said to have had a wry

sense of humour, illustrated when he confronted a student with a nurse near the mortuary in the Malacca GH after lights out. He shone the torch, and when he identified the person concerned, he said "Sonna tokora demo" (Even in such a place).³ Dr Shima also had a flair for handling undergraduates. The students had hard-labour sessions on Sundays. This consisted of felling a rubber plantation to plant tapioca, and was supposed to take place from 2 to 4.30 in the afternoon. The Japanese teachers would make the students start exactly at 2 pm and will not end earlier than 4.30 pm, and so the students would take their time to chop down the trees, chopping down about eight trees per session. When it was Dr Shima's turn to supervise, he asked the students what the average number of trees chopped was, and on being told it was eight, he pointed to eight trees and said that whenever they finished that allotment of trees, they could go off. The students chopped down the eight trees within an hour, and

had the rest of the afternoon off for an outing to town, which was said to invariably include a visit to a casino. After the war, Dr Shima became professor of orthopaedic surgery in the University of Hokkaido. Dr Chee Phui Hung, then one of the students, said that they remembered Dr Shima as a doctor and not as a member of the Japanese Occupation forces. ♦

References

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