



In Memory of Dr Kwa Soon Bee

Text by Prof Tan Ser Kiat

This eulogy was first delivered at Dr Kwa's funeral on 1 November 2016.

It is with a heavy heart and deep sadness that I deliver this eulogy of Dr Kwa – a teacher, mentor, confidante and friend.

Born in September 1930, Dr Kwa Soon Bee had a very distinguished career in shaping the healthcare scene in Singapore after graduating from the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1955. A distinguished haematologist, he has trained many of Singapore's pioneer clinicians.

He was called to higher duty when he assumed the post of Permanent Secretary (Health) and Director of Medical Services at the Ministry of Health (MOH) in 1984, a post he held till his retirement in 1996. Driven by his vision for a world-class healthcare system for Singapore, he systematically carried out many forward-looking reforms and restructuring of our public healthcare system to achieve his objectives.

Two of these significant changes and reforms he brought about has impacted the lives of many and benefited all Singaporeans:

1. Restructuring of our public hospitals.

His vision of building first world healthcare institutions saw him systematically restructuring our public hospitals, specialty centres and polyclinics, turning them into efficient not-for-profit Centres of Excellence, run by top management expertise and overseen by Boards of Directors drawn from both public and private institutions, to ensure good governance and outcomes. Starting with the Singapore General Hospital in 1989, each and every public institution was restructured sequentially, to ensure optimisation of limited financial and human resources, and accountability, while achieving its objective of providing top class care for our people.

2. Development of our healthcare expertise.

Realising the shortage of adequate medical and healthcare expertise to achieve his vision, he set up a Committee on Medical Specialisation to rapidly ramp up the supply of talented human resources to manage our healthcare system. In order to complement the training provided locally, a Health Manpower Development Programme (HMDP) was set up in the early 1980s to send staff to overseas Centres of Excellence for training, ranging from six months to two years.

Our current pool of very talented healthcare specialists in our healthcare system is due in no small way to this far-sighted vision of his. I was one of the fortunate ones to have benefited from this scheme.

Singapore's current excellent healthcare system owes him a debt

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of gratitude for his vision and tireless pursuit of the best possible care for our people. He truly can be called the “Architect of Modern Healthcare of Singapore”.

His contributions to Singapore go far beyond healthcare. He also played a pivotal role in the development of the Jurong Bird Park, Singapore Zoological Gardens, Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (now Singapore Tourism Board) and the Singapore Turf Club. He also started the Singapore Armed Forces Medical Volunteer Corps, which has evolved into today's Combat Support Hospital.

He was a great mentor, teacher and counsellor to many of us. I remember very vividly an incident which left an indelible mark in my career. As a young consultant surgeon in the early 1980s, I was rather demanding, impatient and sometimes quite brash when dealing with hospital

and MOH staff and administrators. One day, I was summoned to his office after an incident with a senior hospital administrator over some administrative blunder. Like a fatherly figure, he gently told me that though in principle I was right, I should be more forgiving and magnanimous and should not be too harsh on the administrator. He added that we should work together as a team for our patients' welfare, overlooking each other's errors and helping one another in the course of our duties. That is one of many management and life's lessons I learnt from him.

Ladies and gentlemen, today we grieve the passing of a giant, a loyal Singaporean and a great friend to many fortunate to be touched by him. We have lost a true son of Singapore.

To Mrs Lucy Kwa and his family and loved ones, no words can adequately express our sincere condolences

and sympathies. Our thoughts and prayers are with you. May the Lord grant you strength and courage at this difficult time of grief.

Dr Kwa, we will miss you dearly and deeply and will remember you forever in our hearts. We know you have completed your work in this world.

May you rest in eternal peace. ◆

The SMA Council expresses our deepest sympathies and heartfelt condolences to the family of Dr Kwa Soon Bee on his passing on 30 October 2016. Dr Kwa was conferred the SMA Honorary Membership in 1997 for his meritorious service to the medical profession in Singapore.