Dr JMJ Supramaniam: A Man of Resilience and Faith – Perspective from a Son

Interview by Dr Toh Han Chong, Editorial Advisor

Dr James Mark Jeyasebasingam Supramaniam, or Dr JMJ Supramaniam for short, was a pioneer in the local management and elimination of tuberculosis, and was among those who developed Tan Tock Seng Hospital from a chest hospital to a general one. Earlier this month, a book titled *He Saved Thousands: The Story of JMJ Supramaniam* was launched to document his biography.

SMA News is privileged to speak with his son, Dato Paul Supramaniam, to gain a more personal perspective about his childhood, career and contributions to local medicine, as well as his harrowing experiences during the war.

– Dr Tan Yia Swam, Editor

A minister's son

Dr Toh Han Chong (THC): Thanks for hosting us in your beautiful home for this interview, Paul. Tell us about your father when he was a child – his background, heritage and his experience growing up?

Dato Paul Supramaniam (PS): Certainly, Han Chong. It's a pleasure to meet you. My father's childhood actually had a very big bearing on him and taught him to live his life based on his convictions – something he learnt from his father. Our ancestry can be traced back to Ceylon, Jaffna in the north, where the family had lived since the early 1200s. My paternal great grandfather came across to Singapore in the 1880s after she became a Crown colony. James Birch, who was appointed Colonial Secretary here in 1870 from Ceylon, invited my great-great uncle, the surveyor Annamalai whom he had worked with in Galle (and after whom Namly Estate is named), to come across and be part of the Colonial service here. Thus, we've had family connections with Singapore since 150 years ago.

My father was born in Kuala Lumpur (KL) in 1921, when the borders between Malaya and Singapore were more fungible. His upbringing was fairly peripatetic, because his father, Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam, was a Methodist minister, the headmaster of Methodist schools in both countries, a community leader and a district superintendent, who was serving at different times in Singapore, KL, Penang, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan.

If I had to define my father's childhood, I would say that it was one of considerably forced resilience. The reason for that is that he never knew his mother. He was the sixth or seventh child that survived, and was barely three years old when his mother died in 1924 following a routine appendix surgery that went awry because the British doctor at Tanglin Hospital in KL was drunk and left cotton wool in her which turned septic. My father told me that he had no memory whatsoever of his mother, except that he believes he has some subconscious memory of being hugged by her. So he never had a mother's love. He was brought up by his eldest sister, Rose Supramaniam, who was a

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concert pianist and 11 years older than him, and had a father who was extremely busy, living in the public eye, living for the community and living out his faith.

My paternal grandfather, born into a devout Hindu family, had come to Singapore as a boy in the early 1890s after the death of both his parents to study at Anglo Chinese School (ACS) and to be a ward of his uncle here. He converted to Christianity at ACS in 1894, was promptly disinherited by his family and had to fend for himself from the age of 14. He also had to look after his younger sister who was then aged eight and schooling at the Methodist Girls' School (MGS). That resilience which my grandfather acquired from adversity was remarkable. He became a top student at ACS, a proficient linguist, the first holder of the ACS Diploma and the first Asian invited to teach Seventh Standard at ACS. Later, he was given a scholarship to be in the first batch of medical students when King Edward College of Medicine opened in 1905, but declined the offer as he was already fully committed to teaching and becoming a Methodist minister.

So my father grew up in an atmosphere where his role model was his amazing father, who as a gutsy widower with seven young children somehow juggled three different but equally important jobs, his role as community leader interacting with governors, and also being a responsible parent giving each of his seven children a good education. Amazingly, he provided for them, paid to get his own sister through MGS and married her off well, and was constantly on the go as one of the first four Asian District Superintendents in Singapore and Malaya. He later also provided dowries for both his daughters.

My father came to Singapore to study at ACS in 1928 when my grandfather was transferred from KL to lead the Methodist Tamil community in Singapore. In early 1931, my grandfather was appointed headmaster of ACS Seremban and a leader of the Tamil community in Negeri Sembilan, and my father had to uproot and move to Seremban. My father once said that he had to learn to fend for himself very early on and my grandfather had assigned him certain tasks. He had to visit the bakery every morning to get fresh bread and bananas for the family, and he became my grandfather's travelling companion into the interior, as his three elder brothers were away studying in Jaffna College, Raffles College and King Edward College of Medicine, respectively.

My father had to prepare the car – a little "Baby Austin" – and had to make sure that the petrol tank was filled, that there were jerry cans of water and extra petrol, and sticks to stave off wild animals, and also that the horn was working. On top of that, he had to hold extra lights because in those days, car lights were not very bright. My grandfather was district superintendent of Pahang, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor, and used to visit the districts at night, so they were often in the jungle together. It was on such trips that my father learnt resilience and dependability, and the resilience from that was something that ungirded him. My father was a little boy of barely 12 years when his father trusted him to make sure everything was needed for those weekly trips.

My father was orphaned at 15, when my grandfather suddenly died, primarily from overwork, although the medical records say the cause of death was "cerebellum thrombosis". The rich infusion of character, responsibility, strong values of service to mankind, and the conviction that life was meant to be lived for others, of which my father got from his father, was very strong.

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The medical career

THC: It is well known that he loved literature, history and reading, and these traits passed down to the children. What compelled him to go into medicine?

PS: My grandfather, because of his strong faith and having become a convert, chose to serve the Methodist church instead of medicine. At that time, he was doing a lot of work helping the poor Tamil workers who were arriving from India. However, I believe he had a hankering that maybe some of his children should do medicine. My father's elder brother, George, went to medical school in 1933 on a scholarship; he was an academic exhibitioner and president of the medical college union in 1938 and 1939.

My father wanted to do literature but his immediate elder sister, Grace, was offered a scholarship to the medical school. In those days, the Federated Malay States (FMS) only gave two scholarships per family for medicine, and Grace said to my father, "You have the potential, you are a bright boy. I'm going to get married and I'll not be able to contribute as much in medicine as you can, so I'm going to give up my scholarship on the basis that you go and do medicine." So she persuaded him, as did George and another elder brother, Robert, that he should do medicine. So out of duty and because his sister gave up the scholarship, he took the FMS scholarship to medical school which he was awarded in 1939 after he topped the senior Cambridge examinations at Methodist Boys' School Kuala Lumpur, getting "A"s in every subject.

The war years

THC: Perhaps share some insights into your father during those war years. I understand that he was acknowledged as a hero during the war.

PS: The war years were very tough on him, but he was extremely reticent in talking about what happened. I was able to glean some insights, but only much later when he and my mother came to live with us and I persuaded him to write some notes about the war years. We then lent those notes to someone who wanted to do a historical project, but we never got those notes back. Fortunately, I have photocopies of the first 13 pages of them. My father also marked up the book on the medical students who were killed in the shelling the day before Singapore surrendered to the Japanese, and so we have those detailed handwritten notes from a first-hand perspective.

From that, I gathered that he joined the British Medical Auxiliary literally a day or two after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Later, in an interview with the National Archives, he was asked about that and he said that he was compelled to enlist as he felt a duty within himself. He worked under fire as a stretcher bearer and medical orderly to evacuate the wounded. When the Japanese's attack on Singapore was in full force, as an army medic part of the British forces, he also had a dog tag and was under authority. On 14 February 1952, he volunteered to lead the Christian burial of Yoong Tatt Sin during the time of heavy Japanese shelling.

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THC: Who was Yoong Tatt Sin?

PS: He was a medical student who had been killed, I believe, during the bombing of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) earlier that morning. While they were out burying him that evening, the Japanese mistook the burial party for Indian soldiers and started to shell them severely. There were only open trenches with no protection so the medical students were directly hit. I think ten medical students were killed. My father was hit by the shelling despite diving into the open trench and two people next to him died instantly – one was hit in the heart. My father thought that he had lost his leg and would soon die from the bleeding. Tan Chee Khoon, who witnessed it, shouted to him from the top of the medical college, “James, come up, come up, you're still alive.” And so he was able to crawl and hop up on one leg back to Sepoy Lines, where he passed out.

Mr Day did emergency surgery on my father, assisted by the head of surgery, Prof Eric Mekie, who wanted to amputate his leg to save his life, but K Shanmugaratnam, who was a medical student assisting in the theatre, said, "No, we must save his leg. He's a champion athlete." He prevailed on Prof Mekie and Mr Day to spare the leg, stayed the night with my father and toileted the leg to prevent infection. There was a permanent hole in his calf, but my father survived. No gangrene set in. The next day, the British surrendered and within two to three days, they were given instructions by the Japanese to evacuate the general hospital in Sepoy Lines to Miyako, the Woodbridge Hospital.

My father was incapacitated on a stretcher and they were not allowed to take anything, including medicines, with them. The Japanese sentries kept watch, but my father realised that the British prisoners of war were going to need medical supplies. As he was on a stretcher under a blanket, he volunteered for his fellow medical students to strap the medicines and syringes onto his body and said, "If I get discovered, it'll just be one person killed. But if I get through, there'll be a huge amount of medication and stuff that we can get across to Miyako Hospital and then to the British." Because he was tall, lots of medicines, syringes and medical supplies were strapped to him under the blanket.

He passed the sentries and was put on a Japanese military truck; he prayed throughout the journey. The Japanese stopped to search the truck, but they never lifted his blanket and the medicines and essential equipment got through. If they had lifted the blanket, it would have been instant death for him as they would have bayoneted him on the spot. For his gallantry, he received a medal from King George after the war.

After he recovered from his injuries, my father worked as a hospital orderly at Woodbridge Hospital to earn some money and make ends meet during the war. He also planted tapioca and sweet potato. I heard this story perhaps in 2000 from Dennis Lee. He was sitting next to me on one side and Mrs Lee Kuan Yew on the other, and Dennis said, “I know your father very well. We planted tapioca during the war together and we used to go to Wesley Church.” That was a lovely story that Dennis told me. My father didn't talk about the war; his elder brother Dr George Supramaniam, who was helping British prisoners of war in Kuching, died during the Occupation in 1944, and another uncle who had joined the Volunteer Corps as a captain was interned in Sime Road Camp. It was a sad time for our family but my father, as a Christian, later forgave the Japanese. As medical students could

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earn some money doing experiments as part of the OKA 9420, he joined that unit till the end of the war. He worked in the vector control section, but he and Othman Wok (who later became a minister), who was also working in OKA 9420, knew nothing about the clandestine germ warfare sub-unit at that time.

Towards the end of the war, when the British restarted the bombing, especially after the dropping of the atomic bombs, it was quite clear that they were returning and the war had turned.

Medical training

THC: Did your father spend any time overseas doing medical specialist training?

PS: Yes, he did. After the war, 28 individuals were picked by the British government from across the various ministries and departments in Singapore to be sent off for Malayanisation. Two of which were doctors – my father and Dr Yeoh Seang Aun. Mrs Jean Marshall recently told me that when that first group went off in 1955, her husband David Marshall had just become chief minister. He was very supportive of Malayanisation and had a hand in who would form the first batch to go to the UK. My father wanted to do obstetrics and gynaecology and had been picked to do that, but at the last minute, the colonial authorities asked, "Tuberculosis (TB) is a major killer, will you go and do that instead?" and he agreed. But there had been an interesting interlude before that.

When he first graduated, the British wanted to send him back because he was on an FMS scholarship and was born in Malaya. The practice then was to send all Malayan scholars back to places like Johore and KL. However, if they went back, they couldn't get specialisation expertise and specialist training the way they could in Singapore. Thus, my father wrote to the Malayan Director of Medical Services (who was based in Penang) seeking permission to do his housemanship in Singapore. When the director refused, my father prepared a petition and had it signed by many of his fellow Malayan scholars. He went to see the colonial secretary and asked to be allowed to stay in Singapore for residency appointments. It was a cogent and powerful petition, and the colonial secretary agreed, making them the first group of Malayan scholars who could stay in Singapore for their specialist training.

THC: Was your father a young doctor at the time you were born?

PS: I was born in 1957 in Edinburgh when he was there as part of Malayanisation working with Prof John Crofton, a TB world authority.

My father entered medical school in 1940. In December 1941, they were interrupted by the war when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Singapore and Malaya. There was a reset button in 1946, when the medical school reopened after the war. He had to go back and start over from the first year despite being a second year student when the war broke out and would have qualified as a doctor in 1945. He graduated in 1951 and was picked for Malayanisation, with the goal to take over the running of some aspects of the medical service from the British after specialised training. He left in 1955 to do internal medicine in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Wales, and by 1957, he had already completed his FRFPS (Glasgow), MRCP Edinburgh and Tuberculous Diseases Diploma (Wales), and

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also worked in hospitals in Edinburgh and London. His progression was very fast; he started late but he accelerated quickly. By 1958, he was one of the early local heads of department in the medical services, under the British.

THC: Your father famously said, “To know TB is to know medicine”, just as Sir William Osler had previously said, “To know syphilis is to know medicine”. What did he mean by this? Given that he was one of the pioneers in TB here and Singapore was then a great leader in TB treatment, tell us about the times he was part of the leading team in the war against TB.

PS: I was too young when he started leading this campaign, but I gleaned insights from several publications he published in 1958 about TB treatment. His knowledge of TB treatment was quite interesting because it was cutting edge at that time. The world authority was Prof Crofton in Edinburgh, whom my father had the privilege of studying with and then working with. Back then, it was normal for one to head off just to get their specialist qualifications and then come back, but my mother joined him and got pregnant with me!

THC: You're a Scottish pregnancy. (chuckles)

PS: Yes, I was a Scottish pregnancy but my mother had a very difficult time. Early in the pregnancy, she had fallen down the steps in the Paris Metro while on holiday with her mother. She started bleeding and was rushed back to Edinburgh; fortunately, I survived. She was then hospitalised for many months and regarded as unstable to travel. My father was summoned back by the colonial secretary after completing his training. He said, “If I come back, my wife would have to stay behind alone because if she travels back, she will lose the baby. So can I stay back and work with Crofton till the baby is born in March or April 1957?”

Ultimately, the colonial secretary agreed and my father had the privilege of working as a specialist doctor in Edinburgh and at the Brompton Hospital in London. He also did a short stint at Moorfields Eye Hospital because he wanted to learn more about ophthalmology. He spent almost a year in Edinburgh until I was born in late March 1957. Just after I was born, my mother was unwell so they stayed on for a while, only returning to Singapore in May 1957.

During that time, my father acquired considerable skills because he had not just completed his training, but was also working as a clinical doctor in Scotland and senior registrar in England.

THC: So he was working in the TB unit?

PS: Yes. Prof Crofton had just come up with the Edinburgh method for TB treatment and my father was part of his team. As someone who believed strongly in clinical research, my father localised the method for Singapore. There were three facets of medicine which he strongly believed in: (1) prevention is better than cure; (2) always put patients first and treat them with one’s head, heart and intuition; (3) all doctors had to be clinician researchers – constantly improving themselves and doing research while practising medicine.

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From the 1950s, my father said that TB could be prevented, and made speeches calling for better housing, better social awareness and compulsory BCG vaccinations (which he was involved with implementing). In putting patients first, my father always quoted Sir William Osler: “The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade”, “It's a calling not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head” and “To prevent disease, to relieve suffering and to heal the sick”. He used to often say that that’s the work of doctors, and he believed in it. In his belief that all doctors had to be clinician-researchers, he didn't believe that one could just be a practitioner, but instead should be a researcher doing cutting-edge academic work with constant self-improvement. He thought doctors should have curious and inquisitive minds to search for answers and better treatments, which only comes when you do research.

He was concurrently a top administrator in the country seeking to prevent ailments (eg, banning smoking in public places) and being in charge of all the hospitals in Singapore, a world-class top clinician seeing patients, and was also chairman of the National Medical Research Council from the 1970s.

So I think when he said, “to know TB is to know medicine”, it was because he was a firm believer that TB could be prevented. He also believed that it could be treated, not just medically but with hearts and minds. That goes back to Sir William Osler. His research on TB with Prof Crofton and Prof Wallace Fox (who later came to be acknowledged himself as a world authority) also contributed to his belief. Lastly, he knew that TB could affect every organ and manifest in many ways. It tested doctors’ intellect, intuition and medical skills of not just one organ. If you were a TB doctor, you had to know the whole body system. You couldn't just say you're a liver specialist or a brain specialist – but a complete physician.

His former students, who are now very senior, shared how he used to say to them in those early days that TB was really a multifaceted condition and to treat it properly you had to have knowledge of many medical disciplines. His belief in prevention led him to actively campaign for occupational health. In the early 1960s, TB was widespread in shophouses and slums. My father wrote an article to say that although hospital almoners had a powerful role in weeding out the people afflicted with TB and bringing them in for treatment, many patients worried about their jobs. Hence, he felt that occupational therapy was needed to speed up rehabilitation and he set that up. Secondly, he believed that workers’ compensation was necessary because many refused treatment in fear of losing their jobs. He helped to pilot workers’ compensation and supported Ivan Baptist, then Member of Parliament and Secretary for Occupational Health and Safety of the National Trades Union Congress. That's the way he wanted to deal with prevention and treatment, and he was very strong in experimenting. He experimented with cycloserine in 1958 before it was used in Britain, and was involved in the clinical research on side effects and how to contain them. It was revolutionary. People like Dr Ong Yong Yau told me about what my father was doing in the late 1950s; when he took over the cudgels to lead the anti-TB campaign, it was the Number 1 killer in the country. Within a few years, it had been brought down to below the top ten killers.

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THC: That's amazing!

PS: And thousands of lives were saved.

Giving his best as a doctor

THC: It's quite illuminating for readers to realise that world-class clinical research, like the work done by your father and his colleagues, actually occurred at that time here in Singapore.

PS: In fact, Sir Tom Blundell FRS, former chief scientist in the UK and now a science advisor to the Singapore Government, once said that the work done in TB by my father, with emphasis on clinical research, was the foundation for today's Singapore self-belief in medical research.

As a child, I remember my father saying that the rest of the world thinks that we can't do world-class research here, but we've done it with TB, and he became a world authority and special advisor to the World Health Organization in 1964. He was in Geneva for a very long time through 1964 and helped to set up medical services in African countries, Taiwan and India. He really believed that we had the skills and resilience, and he knew what he could do as he was respected on the world stage. In fact, he co-chaired the British Medical Research Council and was as good as anyone else in the world. That's why he believed that we could set up neurosurgery, cardiothoracic surgery and tertiary care here, and be as good as the rest of the world.

TTSH was just a chest and TB hospital when my father became medical superintendent in 1967. He wanted to make it a general hospital and also knew that they better be excellent in certain aspects that don't exist in Singapore so as to become the top place in the whole country. Dr John joined from GH and created a cardiac unit, my father pulled Dr Tham Chok Fai from Thomson Road Hospital to re-train as a neurosurgeon and established neurosurgery, and Dr Tan Ngoh Chuan and later Joseph Sheares for cardiothoracic surgery, among other specialties. The then government had small budgets, so he reached out to a very rich philanthropist – the founder and head of Chung Khiaw Bank – and with that donation, he set up rehabilitation medicine in TTSH.

He's the longest serving medical superintendent who served from 1967 to 1979, and from 1971 he was concurrently also Deputy Permanent Secretary for Health, Deputy Director of Medical Services, chairman of the Medical Aviation Board, and was actively chairing 13 other Government committees.

THC: His heart was very close to TTSH.

PS: Because it was a poor man's hospital. To him, it was really important that help had to be given to the lowest in our society. He was a great athlete and he believed in the healthy wholesome person, but there were some who just couldn't help themselves and it was the role of society to help them.

THC: You mentioned that he was Deputy Permanent Secretary working alongside then Permanent Secretary Dr Andrew Chew.

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PS: From the 1950s, he had already shown a strong sense of self-belief. He believed that medicine had a bigger role than to simply dispense medicine and heal people. He believed that some ailments could be prevented with better social policies, diets and exercise, and he also believed in the strength of medicine for international diplomacy. He was already practising a form of diplomacy for Singapore when he went to Geneva in 1964, because we were part of Malaysia and had no foreign service. He was out there as a voice for Singapore. He believed that medicine had that wider role and it gave one very strong skills that were portable at the government sphere. He even had the gutsiness to fly the Singapore flag!

However, my father did not desire to be in government or be involved in party politics. He chose to always be available for the common men and believed that medicine was a calling and a skill; it has to be an art practised with a heart – again I go back to the Osler quote. And so he stayed in public service until the very end, though many others moved on because the salaries were very low. When he retired, he was being paid $5,000 a month and received a pension of $1,100. These were the people who built the country on a pension of $1,100, with which they would have to live for 30 years thereafter. It was quite extraordinary, but it was sacrificial.

He believed that TTSH could be a microcosm for good and even set an example for other hospitals. As a strong and inspirational leader, there was very little politics within the hospital and even prima donnas worked as a team. He created within TTSH a strong sense of camaraderie.

He promoted the empowerment of unit heads and individual doctors, especially young doctors. Dr Lee Suan Yew recalled that in 1962, when he was a young doctor working with my father, he was trusted to do pleural taps. My father also had an open-door policy and kept it open all the time. Many doctors remember how kind, gracious and approachable he was.

When my father was in TTSH and later in the Ministry, he led by example. He believed that every doctor, even those in administration, had to be close to the patient. So his day was divided into several segments as he managed his multiple roles while still seeing patients, because he wanted to stay grounded.

He was doing so many things and keeping all of these on the go at the same time, as well as finding time for actual research work because he had the privileges and also duty to ensure real research as a Singaporean chairing a joint Singapore-British medical research council team on TB research. The Cambridge medical historian Dr (Lady) Mary Dobson recently stated in a book, Murderous Contagion: A Human History of Disease, that “James Supramaniam in Singapore and Wallace Fox in Africa and India pioneered the use of antibiotics for TB… (including rifampicin…) [which] proved spectacularly successful in treating TB, and has over the following decades saved millions of lives globally.” He believed that one could have all of these facets, so he worked in the hospital, in the ministry, in research and in teaching. He taught postgraduate medicine and was an examiner for the MMed. He would spend time abroad, and he still kept his other interests. Every week, he chaired the Civil Aviation Board sittings. He had even established a system when the British were pulling out, for which he wrote the template that's still in use today for the certification of pilots! The air space

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mattered, and how we controlled it and the regulation of pilots and aviation medicine in Singapore came out of his efforts and leadership. His standards became part of an international code.

Beyond just work

THC: I also want to focus on his multifaceted talents. Tell us more about his talents in sports and other areas?

PS: In university, he was captain of the athletics and soccer teams (despite injuring his leg during the war); he was a champion athlete who held the Keith Cup (after Dr Chan Ah Kow), and he ran in the Amateur Athletics Association's meets in Singapore and Selangor. As a young doctor, he also played league soccer, hockey and badminton. He was part of the first ever students' union in 1949 when King Edward College and Raffles College merged. As a student leader and a leader of the King Edward College Union, he became the first vice-president of the combined Students' Union of the University of Malaya. My father really made his time count; he could multitask – working with the British to win their respect while also being part of student nationalism and the impetus for self-government. I have some of his interesting papers as a student union leader. He led the inquiry on ragging because he believed that ragging was being used as an excuse by some males to take advantage of women, and he believed that women rights need to be protected. He chaired that inquiry and was very robust in his recommendations. He was a great lover of poetry, history, literature and music. He listened extensively to classical music in Singapore and when he was in Europe he would travel to hear famous conductors like Wilhelm Furtwangler. He made me and my siblings learn music when we were kids, and even encouraged my mother to pick up violin!

THC: He was truly a renaissance man.

PS: I think his brain was large and sponge-like but he also had a conscience and a large heart. His heart was very strong for the common man and the underdog.

THC: As a young boy, you must have seen a very busy father.

PS: I hardly saw him, except for the occasional tennis lesson at night, and possibly briefly on weekends. Even then, he worked on Saturdays. Minister Grace Fu's mother (James Fu's wife), who was at that time matron at TTSH, said that there's the apocryphal story of him being such a workaholic, yet very kind and approachable. Sometimes, he would send the *jaga* (Malay for guard) and his secretary off and carry on working. There was once that he worked late and they closed the entire Ministry. The *jaga* left and the security system was activated, and my father couldn't get out. The police had to be called to deactivate the security system so that he could leave later at night. He did not tick anybody off and he never troubled the *jaga*.

On another occasion, he was working late and the official car that he was driving was under repair in the garage. Though we had a driver, he did not want to be driven around as he felt that would suggest that he was *sikit atas* (Malay for snobbish). That night, both my father and Matron Fu were working late, and she said "I hear your car's in the garage." My father replied, "Yeah, I'll take a taxi back home." But she replied, "No, I'll drive you home, but I've only got a little Suzuki." Her husband

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had recently bought her a little 600-CC Suzuki. And he said, "I'd love to go in a little Suzuki because I've never been in one. And we can talk!" So she drove him home and they talked about their families. That is a very lovely anecdote.

During his time in the ministry, my father was very far-sighted. He saw that smoking created passive sufferers so he wanted smoking banned in public places and students educated against smoking. After TB, he turned his hand to cancer and cancer research, improving our medical services and all specialist disciplines, upgrading the skills of nursing staff via tertiary training, bringing private hospitals under government supervision and developing them to serve the region as part of medical tourism. He played a key role in the development of our medical services as we know them today – he was part of the foundation of our medical services. He was a doctor's doctor, an administrator par excellence and a world-class clinician researcher in TB who even started using chemotherapy to treat TB.

THC: Woah, really?

PS: Yes, he was an early proponent of using chemotherapy for treating localised TB. From that, he knew the impact of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and felt that more research needed to be done on cancer. He focused on lung cancer, and realised that smoking and passive smoking was a problem. Hence, he persuaded the Government to introduce the banning of smoking in public places. In 1969, at the World Conference on Smoking and Heath held in New York City, he spoke on the harmful effects of active and passive smoking, and called for a ban on smoking in public places.

THC: That's a big legacy.

PS: Throughout his life, he was prepared to step out and do things differently. He believed in doctors' welfare and made the careers of countless young doctors by mentoring them, securing scholarships for them to go for advanced training abroad, and even getting them free accommodation at TTSH in the doctors' quarters because in those days, government doctors' salaries were very low. Because both his father and grandfather died young, and he himself had been ill at age 55, he retired from Government service in 1976. However, he recovered and went back to work! In fact, he was on contract service when he was promoted to a special grade that was created for him as a retiree – that was pretty unbelievable. He stayed on until he was 60 and then fell ill again.

He was a workaholic and it came at a personal cost. When he came back in the evenings late at night, there would be patients who would just arrive at our home just to see him. They would say, "We want to see you and we can't see you any other way – will you see us?" Hence, he would see these patients at home.

THC: What was the driving spirit of your father? What were some of the principles that he lived by?

PS: Firstly, Christian values; putting others before self, and serving God and the country would very much epitomise the values that he held. He also always believed that whatever you do, do it quietly.

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What you do with the right hand, the left hand should not know. My mother, who was also religious, persuaded him to tithe, and though he was a Government doctor and didn't earn much, he believed that once you take on something and believe in it, you do it always. It was not just income – he gave away 10% of capital to the church. He and my mother helped to fund and found community churches and orphanages in India and Ceylon.

THC: I would imagine that he'd do that very quietly.

PS: He never wanted to be recognised. In the same way, he never wanted anything named after him. He was always low-key. He had 24 publications and 14 major international presentations to his name but was always extremely humble and self-effacing. He was very surprised when, in the early 1970s, he was one of the first doctors to be awarded the Public Administration Medal (PPA [Gold]), and rarely talked about it. He was asked to address the World Health Assembly in 1972 but he kept it low-key and never talked to us about it. I only discovered most of this much later after his death because he was meticulous and he kept his papers in files.

My father also wanted the upliftment of the Indians and Malays, because that's what his father had done and also because of his own strong belief in the common man. I recall that when I was a child, many of the hospital dressers, nurses, hospital porters and ambulance drivers were Malay and Indian. Occasionally, after playing tennis on Saturday evenings after working all day in his office, he'd come home to them waiting for him. He would then change into a sarong and a singlet, and would sit with them in the garden and drink sweet tea. The satay man would also come and make satay for them. He did this because he wanted them to be able to talk to him about their real problems, he talked to them in Tamil or Malay.

THC: That's amazing.

PS: Later, when the Ceylonese had their problems and the Ceylonese doctors, especially the Tamils, were being discriminated against, he brought them over and gave them jobs. Even top names like Sir Sabaratnam Arulkumaran were given a job by my father, and many of them came here using Singapore as a stepping stone. My uncle, my mother's brother, was also brought here and became a professor of paediatrics. He discovered Reye's syndrome and then later went off to England. My father believed that doctors needed a career sanctuary that Singapore could offer, and would also bring tremendous benefit to the country.

The Supramaniam family

THC: Why didn't you become a doctor? There's such a strong lineage of medicine in your family.

PS: Too big shoes to fill... not just my father's, but also my maternal grandfather's. He went to medical school in 1911 and was a medical superintendent of hospitals in Malaya by the early 1920s, with seniority over British doctors, and was personal physician to the Sultan of Johore. Two older uncles on my father's side were also doctors and my mother's brother was a professor of paediatrics. My mother had also gotten into medical school but was made by her father to switch to botany.

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Therefore, I felt that I needed to tread a different path – but do sometimes regret not doing medicine. At that time I felt overwhelming pressure and also a worry that I may let the family down...

THC: What's life like in the Supramaniam family?

PS: The holidays were interesting, but because he was always busy, we didn't have many vacations with him. There was one very memorable time back in 1965 or 1966 when we went up to Cameron Highlands and stayed at Cluny Lodge, a rest house that was the property of the Singapore Government and available to senior people. My father wanted to spend time with us and he invited my cousins along too and drove us all up. There was also a Government holiday house in Changi that was available for senior people, and we'd occasionally go there for the holidays.

Every year until his passing, we visited my maternal grandfather (JMJ's father-in-law) in Ceylon. My mother and I would take the boat because we had to bring along all the *barang-barang* (Malay for belongings). My father, younger sister and younger brother would fly as my father could only take a few days off work.

As children, we also once visited my father's old stomping ground: Edinburgh. He took me to the Royal Infirmary, to Arthur's Seat, and to where Sir John Crofton lived.

My father developed a love of music in me, so when he had time, he would ring to say, "I'm coming home a little bit earlier today for Paul to do music." And he would bring these scores of Beethoven symphonies. He conducted the Tamil Methodist Church choir on Sundays when he was in town and he was a lay leader of the Methodist church.

THC: He's done so many things in his lifetime.

PS: He was also on the governing and judicial council that established the constitution of the Singapore and Malaysian Methodist churches when they split in 1967 or 1968.

THC: Wow! How was he as a father? Perhaps share with us some memories of him?

PS: I have some good memories of my father and there were times when I got to see him as a doctor. My younger brother was born very premature in 1961. At the end of 1961, my father brought him home and he needed oxygen. He was asthmatic and in those days, if you were born very premature, you often didn't survive.

When I was five, I had a very sudden onset of severe appendicitis which caused terrible acute pain. My mother thought it was indigestion and said, "No, it'll be fine." At about four o'clock that afternoon, I was literally in tears and I said to her, "Can daddy come home and see me?" She called him and gave him the symptoms; he came straight home, felt my tummy, lifted me, put me into the car and drove straight to the General Hospital (GH) where they operated on me immediately, saving my life. I was on very light anaesthetic as he didn't want me to be heavily anaesthetised. Throughout the night, after the surgery, I kept getting up and he was there, sitting next to me and holding my

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hand. I was staying at the first-class wards in the old GH, and the matron was a white lady in a white starched uniform and Florence Nightingale hat. When I got a little better on the second or third day, my father gave me a toy jeep and although we weren't allowed to run along the corridors, the matron allowed me to drive it up and down. That was my father's special treat to me.

Often, I'd wait at TTSH after school and he'd teach me to play tennis at the Island Club. He would then go back to work and the driver would bring me home. One day, while we were at the Island Club, there was this sudden call for help. A staff member of the club exclaimed, "Can the doctor come?" I must have been ten or 11 years old when this happened. My father ran into the clubhouse where somebody had had a massive heart attack. I saw my father perform CPR on the man; he told everyone to move away and he then called for an emergency kit. Toh Chin Chye was there and he said, "If James is dealing with it, everybody stand aside." I think the man was close to dying, but my father said, "I have to keep going" and kept fighting for him. He then took an injection from the kit and injected it straight into his heart.

I have a lot of such memories. Once, when I was 15 or 16, I disagreed with my mother and said to her rudely, "I don't need to listen to you, because you're not as clever as Dad."

THC: (gasps) Ooh... that's painful.

PS: And I got thoroughly thrashed (laughs). My father told me, "Don't you ever say that to anybody about them being less clever! And respect – you need to have respect for age. It's not cleverness, it's age."

I'd like to share one more anecdote. It's really interesting. I had sustained a very bad injury while serving my National Service (NS), with peripheral tears on both knee menisci and two slipped discs. I was downgraded to Physical Employment Standards Grade 3 and couldn't enter senior term officer cadet school. Both Prof Chan Heng Thye and Prof P Balasubramaniam saw me. I went to my father and said, "I want to do senior term but I have these injuries and fluid in the knees." And he asked if I was sure. I replied, "Yes. Can you get me upgraded?" And he asked, "Do you realise the impact? You'll have to go through it with painkillers. Are you prepared to do that with a bad back?" I said yes and he asked, "Why do you want to do it? Do you want to do it just to be an officer?" I said, "No, I think it's the right thing to serve the country." So he said, "Alright." About two or three days later, I suddenly receive a call from the medical board – it was a formality and I was upgraded.

THC: It was dangerous for your knees though.

PS: He had taken the risk himself. He wrote a waiver, rang the Permanent Secretary of Defence, and said, "This boy wants to do it. If he wants to, I'll take responsibility. Let him do it." I went through senior term on painkillers, got commissioned and went on to become a NS lieutenant colonel!

THC: Woah.

PS: He had been through the war and he was resilient. My grandfather was resilient.

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THC: So you got that inspiration from them.

PS: In those early days in the 1970s, we were commissioned and there was a dinner at the Istana. For the first time, he said to me, “You've done me proud.” He said just that and nothing else, just “You've done me proud.”

THC: Thank you so much, Paul. Excellent insights into your father; truly one of Singapore’s finest doctors and sons. Thank you.

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