

# A Heart for the Common Folk

*Citation for Prof Aline Wong, delivered by Dr Tan Sze Wee*

A very good evening to our Guest of Honour, Minister for Health, Mr Khaw Boon Wan, fellow doctors and friends. The Agong, Dr Chee Phui Hung is an impossible act to follow, which I will not even attempt to try. For the younger folk among us, I understand that Dr Chee used to be a Member of Parliament from 1959 to 1961 under the banner of Singapore People's Alliance. He also hails from Penang like our Guest-of-Honour.

Tonight, we are honouring a trailblazer in many ways. She was a true-blue 'foreign talent' before the word became fashionable. She was a female politician before ladies were commonly seen in Parliament.

But more importantly, tonight, we are honouring a non-doctor who has contributed immensely to healthcare in Singapore. It would be remiss of me not to mention that it is extremely rare for the SMA to confer its highest honour on a lay man or rather, a lay woman in this case. Certainly, the SMA has not conferred the Honorary Membership on any lay man in the last 10 years. In fact, this is the first time that the Singapore Medical Association is conferring an Honorary Membership on a lay woman.

Prof Aline Wong hails from Hong Kong. She received her education at the University of Hong Kong, where she obtained her Bachelor's degree for Economics and Political Science in 1962. She furthered her studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where she obtained her Masters and PhD in Sociology (1964 and 1970). She began her academic career at the then University of Singapore in 1971, and became a full Professor in Sociology in 1991 at the National University of Singapore.

It is interesting to note the way she described how she ended up in Singapore. I believe she said something like "as a dutiful wife, I was following my husband to where he was to work as a lecturer". This is very typical of her unassuming and understated nature. But her contributions to Singapore, her adopted home, have far exceeded any notion of what is expected of a mere dutiful wife.

Prof Wong entered politics in 1984 as Member of Parliament (MP) for Changkat Changi Constituency where she remained as a MP for 17 years over four terms. She was appointed to the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for both Health and Environment in 1987, and became the Chairman of GPC for Health in 1989.

In 1989, she founded the Women's Wing for the People's Action Party and remained its Chairman until 2001, when she retired from active politics. In 1990, she was promoted to Minister of State for Health and in 1994, given the Education portfolio concurrently. As a testament of her abilities, she was promoted to Senior Minister of State in 1995.

Now an active grandmother of three boys, or should I rather say a grandmother of three active boys, she is Chairman of the Housing and Development Board, and Director of both MediaCorp Pte Ltd and the Singapore Symphonia



*Prof Aline Wong receives the SMA Honorary Membership award from Health Minister Mr Khaw Boon Wan.*

Company. She is also a Consultant to the Singapore Institute of Management-Open University Centre, and President of the International Women's Forum (Singapore Chapter).

During her 10 years in political office, Prof Aline Wong was involved in major policy initiatives in the areas of women's rights, family life and education. But it is perhaps in the area of healthcare that she will be remembered most for her contributions, both first as a backbencher and then as a Minister. Her involvement and leadership in healthcare matters include primary healthcare and elderly care services, healthcare programmes for women, nursing education and training, public health education and regulation of traditional Chinese medicine.

In all that she has done in healthcare, she has demonstrated empathy for the common folk and the disadvantaged. She showed an uncanny ability to integrate the social and healthcare needs of the people, in the form of well-crafted and presented healthcare policies.

As doctors, we can take a leaf from Prof Aline Wong's book – that we give due consideration not only to the medical problems of the patient, but also to do so in the context of social determinants and their interplay.

Today's scholarly healthcare policy wonks have much to learn too from Prof Wong's way of doing things. That beyond the analysis of numbers and making hard-nosed decisions on allocation of limited healthcare resources in Singapore, do spare a thought for how the man-in-the-street or the faceless healthcare worker feels.

As Prof Aline Wong has displayed throughout her political career, you can only say you have a heart for the common folk when you have a real feel for the ground.

Truly, Prof Wong, an academic by training, a politician by calling, has also acquired the heart of a physician by feeling. For this, as well as her many years of contribution to healthcare, the Singapore Medical Association confers upon Prof Aline Wong, the Singapore Medical Association's Honorary Membership.

Now it is my pleasure to invite both Dr Wong and the Health Minister Mr Khaw Boon Wan, onstage for the conferment of the award. ■