

# Professor Woo Keng Thye

was born in Ipoh in 1944. He graduated from the Medical Faculty of the University of Singapore in 1969. He has worked in the Department of Renal Medicine since 1975 and is presently Emeritus Consultant and Advisor. His research interest is in IgA nephritis. He is the Chairman of the National Medical Research Council and his hobbies include writing and bonsai.



*A loving grandpa with his granddaughters, Adeline and Anne.*

- 1. When I was a child, I wanted to be a ...**  
 ... doctor. After my 'A' levels, I decided to be a journalist with a view to a career in writing. Because of parental objections, I became a medical student telling myself that I would still be a writer. I wrote my first novel as a third year medical student (1967) – it was promptly rejected by Heinemann Asia. In 1986, Heinemann Asia published my first novel, *Web of Tradition*. It was reprinted in 1989 as it was adopted as a supplementary text in the schools. My second book, *Encounter and Other Stories*, published in 1989 was also reprinted in 1992. *Risen Ash* was my first collection of poems published by Sam Boyd Enterprise. My last book *Obsession* was launched in 2000 by Raffles, an imprint of SNP Editions Pte Ltd. Altogether, I have had a book of poetry and six other novels/short stories with four by Heinemann Asia and five reprinted by Raffles in the year 2000. It has been very fulfilling practising medicine and writing.
- 2. My best medical school memory is ...**  
 ... as a freshman, attending our first address by Professor GA Ransome, our Professor of Medicine at that time. He left an indelible impression: a distinguished looking Professor in his white coat with a stethoscope, genial smile and kind face, referring to us as 'medical embryos'. He was to be my tutor later on and I still remember his words to me, "Young man, you are uneducated." – because I did not know what Bamberger's sign was. He was a great teacher.
- 3. The most influential person in my early life ...**  
 ... was my mother. I had a lot of love from her and she taught me how to be a good and honest man and to distinguish right from wrong. In later life, it is my wife who is my confidante and my advisor.
- 4. The most memorable, touching or amusing thing I can remember as a practising doctor is ...**  
 ... of course SARS. I had never had the fear of death practising as a doctor, until we met SARS.

But the most touching memory was an encounter in my early years when I was a medical officer in Kluang District Hospital in Malaysia. I had performed a Caesarian Section on a lady; it must have been about my 100<sup>th</sup> or so section then as a surgical medical officer. It was a long weekend call where the night before I had operated on a perforated gastric ulcer, a ruptured appendix, another retrocecal appendix, a Caesarian Section for foetal distress and while putting the last stitches to the skin, I was informed that there was another case of foetal distress which necessitated an urgent Caesarian Section.

The baby was delivered and I had stitched up the incision in the uterus. It was then that I discovered I had inadvertently cut the urinary bladder – the dreaded complication of a simple operation like this. The poor lady developed a vesico-vaginal fistula. Whenever the urinary bladder filled up, she would leak urine into her vagina which flowed out and caused her to wet her panties.

The patient was referred to a gynaecologist who told her that such repair operations were usually very difficult because of the surrounding fibrosis and adhesions and sometimes, as a result of further attempts at repair, more harm was done.

I subsequently left Kluang for Johor Bahru for post-graduate training, passed my examinations and then returned to Kluang to work as a general practitioner. One day, a woman and her two-year-old daughter walked into my consultation room. She gave me a broad smile and asked if I remembered her. She told me I had delivered her little girl by Caesarian Section two years ago.

“Doctor, don’t you remember me? I was the patient who leaked urine whenever I laughed. I’m all right now. You were so concerned. Now you’ve opened a clinic in town, I thought I’ll pay you a visit to let you know.”

The fistula had closed eventually after causing physical and mental anguish to the poor patient for two years. Ironically, that was the last Caesarian operation that I performed as I had secured a medical traineeship in Internal Medicine. I was very very happy that the fistula had closed. The patient’s plight had been on my conscience all the time and I had felt very guilty.

#### 5. The best things my colleagues said to me:

- “When drinking, always remember the fountain. It is the source of your water.”  
– *Dato Dr Wong Chong Wah, my first teacher in Internal Medicine in Kluang, 1971.*
- “Here at the Post Graduate Medical Centre in JB, we train you like race horses with a lot of sand papering before we send you for the exams in Singapore.”  
– *Dato Dr Lim Kee Jin, my second teacher in Internal Medicine in JB, 1973.*
- “Now that you have given up private practice in Kluang and decided to return to institutional practice in SGH, you must stay for a long time and contribute to Medicine and Society.”  
– *Dato Prof Seah Cheng Siang, 1975.*
- “You will be posted to the Department of Renal Medicine. Your boss will be Dr Lim Cheng Hong, a good man and a strict disciplinarian. If you cannot stand it after six months, I will post you out.”  
– *Dr Andrew Chew, Director of Medical Services then, 1975.*

Years later, when I thanked Dr Andrew Chew for posting me to Renal Medicine and for all his help and support, he replied, “You walked there yourself.” Dr Andrew Chew is a rare gem, among men. I continued to work with Dr Lim Cheng Hong until he retired at the age of 70 and I succeeded him. He was a very strict boss but certainly one of the finest bosses I ever had.

#### 6. I spend my Sunday mornings ...

... going to church with my wife May. Sundays are sacred. It is family day which we spend together with our two daughters Bernardine and Geraldine, son-in-law Bernard and our two grand children Adeline (seven years) and Anne (four years). The highlight is the family lunch.

#### 7. A bad habit I would like to kick is:

- Refusing to part with all the junk I have collected all these years. My wife would put everything together and ever so often ask me about it, and under pressure I would agree to let her throw it away. I am still on the road to liberation. As we grow older, we need less and less things. We have to clear our physical and mental cobwebs.
- I enjoy a nice cigar once a week and treasure my collection of pipes.

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8. **My greatest extravagance ...**

... are books and old comics. I love bookshops and would go to a lot of trouble even overseas to buy old comics. I have a collection of *Tarzan*, *Cowboy*, *Combat*, *Phantom* and other comics.

9. **The book I am currently reading is ...**

... *Son of Heaven* by Ling Li, Panda Books, 1995. It is about Shunzhi (1638-1661), first emperor of the Qing Dynasty. He was the father of Emperor Kang Xi. It unfolds against a backdrop of social upheaval as one dynasty crumbles and another struggles to establish itself. It tells of life within the Forbidden City, of ambition, love and loss, and about the clash between Western Science and traditional values.

I am also reading *Winter in Tibet* by Alex O' Brien, Asia Books, 2005, an adventure book involving a talented corporate lawyer, gang fights, shoot-outs from the streets of Hong Kong to the mountains of Tibet, a trail of money and the discovery of a truth that binds two cultural poles. My favourite authors are Ernest Hemingway and Somerset Maugham, and my favourite poet is TS Elliot. My favourite book is *The Old Man and The Sea* by Hemingway.

10. **I would like to be remembered as ...**

... a good father and a loving grandpa. I have led a rich and fulfilling life with the practice of Medicine as my first love and writing as my second love. ■