

By A/Prof Goh Lee Gan and A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean

In Memoriam: Dr Wong Heck Sing (1923 – 2007)



Dr Wong Heck Sing had through his 84 years led a fulfilling life. Those who are privileged to have known him personally will know more of his journey through life and have a better sense of what made him tick. The events in his life were momentous struggles at times, yet he bore them with great commitment, tenacity, and fortitude.

Fortunately for all of us he has written down some of his struggles, his vision and aspirations. His legacies to posterity are: his stories of his Batam years from 1942 to 1945 which he put together into a book¹ that ran through two editions, the first Sreenivasan Oration in 1978 titled “The Future Singapore General Practitioner”², and the 1997 SMA Lecture titled “In Search of Future Role Models in Medicine”³.

He believed in role models. He believed that in the practice of Medicine we need role models. In his SMA Lecture, he alluded to the role models of his time and shared what he perceived are the characteristics of role models. These are: (1) they inspire by their example and conduct, (2) they have a love for humanity, (3) they are highly skilled and knowledgeable, (4) they have a broad perspective of life, (5) they have an ability to teach effectively, (6) they

are well versed both in the art and science of medicine, (7) they have the patient’s welfare as their foremost priority, and (8) they have the necessary self respect which enable them to gain respect from others. He walked the talk, and he had all these characteristics. He is a role model of life.

Early Years

Dr Wong Heck Sing was born in 1923, the sixth child and second son of a family of nine children, four girls and five boys. His parents came from the Fuzhou Province of China, where his father, a Christian lay catechist, was the Principal of a school for the blind. His parents, like many of his father’s generation, left China to seek a better life for their children in Nanyang – a new world of opportunity.

During the Great Depression of the 1920s, his father was offered a 20-acre rubber estate in Batam Island for \$10. His mother immediately bought it, which in Dr Wong’s words was “little guessing how fateful this decision would prove to be.” Batam Island was the refuge of his family in the war years.

Dr Wong was educated at St Andrew’s School. He passed his ‘O’ Levels Cambridge Examination

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in 1939 with distinctions, but had to wait seven years before entering medical school in 1946. Many would have given up along the way, but not Dr Wong who, with persistence, perseverance and determination, survived and weathered the uncertainties, obstacles and hardships of the war years to achieve his ambition of becoming a doctor.

Before entering medical school, he was teaching English in a Chinese school for six months, did Pharmacy for one year at the British Dispensary, having been sent there by the Department of Pharmacy, King Edward VII College of Medicine where he was a pharmacy student. However, Pharmacy was not stimulating enough, and he applied to Raffles College to read Science. In December 1941, his studies were interrupted by the Second World War. During the war years from 1942 to 1945, Dr Wong became a farmer on Batam Island, planting and subsisting on sweet potatoes and tapioca.

In Batam, he was practising Medicine even before graduating as a doctor as he was treating war casualties with the knowledge and training that he had received from the Medical Auxiliary Services (MAS) when the war began. The details can be found in his book, *The Batam Years*¹.

Dr Wong was a self-made man. When the war ended in 1945, he had the opportunity to operate a canteen for the Dutch POWs, and saved enough money to pay for most of the school fees for his medical education. As a medical student, he was appointed part-time demonstrator in Biochemistry from 1947 to 1948 and Anatomy from 1948 to 1949. The King Edward VII College of Medicine paid Dr Wong \$50 per month for these appointments. However, he had to take a loan to complete his final year of study.

MEDICAL PRACTICE AND VOLUNTARY WORK

Upon graduation, Dr Wong went into general practice in 1953 after serving his housemanship in the government service. His first place of practice was at old Jurong Road next door to where A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean is practising today. Wong Dispensary thrived and together with partners, he managed two clinics, one at Bukit Timah and another at Bukit Panjang. At that time, his practice was over large stretches of land and the only one in the Western part of Singapore. Very often he was paid in kind or with chickens and eggs or agricultural products instead of money. In spite of all these, he became a very successful and

busy country GP, practising according to the famous dictum of Ambroise Pare, the famous 16th century French surgeon: “To cure, sometimes, to relieve, often, but to comfort, always.”

Instead of devoting all his time and energy to his clinic only, Dr Wong took it upon himself to serve his community and did voluntary work. He was Honorary Doctor at Nanyang University from 1956 to 1960, attending to sick students from 6pm to 10pm, sacrificing family life and commitments.

Dr Wong was also Honorary Physician to the Salvation Army Nursery Home from 1956 to 1963. At that time, there was a smallpox epidemic in Indonesia and the babies, some of whom were from the neighbouring islands, were at risk. Without hesitation, Dr Wong used his clinic’s smallpox vaccines to vaccinate all the babies at the Salvation Army Nursery Home free of charge.

Dr Wong was also Honorary Doctor to the Lee Kuo Chuan Home for the Aged from 1964 to 1970. His depth and breadth in medical practice then included adolescent medicine as he was also Honorary Physician to Boys’ Town from 1956 to 1970. He even catered to the uniformed, when he was corps surgeon to the St John’s Ambulance Brigade from 1956 to 1970. Education was even covered for he was the Vice-Chairman, Jalan Teck Whye Secondary School Advisory Committee from 1968 to 1971.

ADVOCATE FOR FAMILY MEDICINE

Dr Wong was a strong advocate for family medicine. He was the President of the College of Family Physicians for three terms (1973-1974, 1975-77 and again from 1983-1985). He worked hard with a group of dedicated Council members to develop the College’s premises and realise its aims and objectives.

The College is proud of what Dr Wong had set in motion. His thoughts on family medicine in its early years in the 1970s were encapsulated in two papers that he presented. The first paper, which was presented at the Singapore Medical Association’s 7th National Medical Convention, held from 17 to 24 April 1976, was titled “Family Medicine in Singapore: Past, Present and Future”. The second important paper on family medicine was the first Sreenivasan Oration of the College of Family Physicians that he gave on 19 November 1978, titled “The Future Singapore General Practitioner.”² What he said then provided the road map for the development of family medicine in Singapore. Succeeding Presidents and College Councils have translated his vision into present day reality.

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In the 1970s, Dr Wong was also actively involved with the world body of family doctors, WONCA (World Organisation of National Colleges and Academies). He was a member of the WONCA Executive Committee from 1976 to 1978. The good relationship between the College of Family Physicians, Singapore and the world body that Dr Wong and his colleagues initiated in the 1970s has continued till the present day. This relationship has been helpful in nurturing the fledging family medicine movement in Singapore then and even up to the present day, the strong regional and global relationship of Singapore and the world of family medicine has been valuable. Singapore hosted the world congress of WONCA in 1983 and would do so for the second time this year.

University of Singapore for doctors pursuing family medicine as a career was created. Unlike many schemes of family medicine training across the world, Singapore had chosen to train doctors preparing for the degree of MMed (Family Medicine) to be at the level of intensity on par with the hospital-based specialist MMed programmes. Family doctors trained to this level would be trainers, administrators, researchers and leaders of the discipline. As of 2007, we have 246 family doctors trained to this level. For the rank and file family doctors, a Graduate Diploma in Family Medicine was started in 2000 to enable doctors to achieve an enhanced level of practice. As of 2007, we have 198 doctors trained to this level.

Dr Wong chaired the pro-tem committee that formed the College in 1971. In 2001, he



Standing (Left to Right):

Prof Feng Pao Hsui, Censor; Prof Wong Poi Kwong, Chairman, Chapter of Physicians; Dr Chew Chin Hin, Master; Dr Wong Heck Sing, President, College of General Practitioners; Dr Seah Cheng Siang, Censor; Dr V K Pillay, Bedel; Dr Choo Jim Eng, Bursar; Mr R Singh, ADC to the President

Sitting (Left to Right):

Mrs Dr Wong Heck Sing; Mrs B H Sheares; President Sheares, Patron; Mrs Dr Chew Chin Hin; Dr Beatrice T M Chen, Scribe

Source:

Academy of Medicine, Singapore - The First 25 Years (1957-1982). Singapore: Academy of Medicine, Singapore, 1982.

The College built on what Dr Wong and his pioneering group started. Today, besides CME for family doctors, which was started since the founding of the College way back in 1971, we have undergraduate teaching in family medicine that was started in 1970.

In 1988, a formal MOH vocational training in Family Medicine leading to the degree of MMed (Family Medicine) awarded by the National

responded to the call to form yet another FM institution, the Institute of Family Medicine by accepting the pro-tem chair and immediately writing a cheque of \$10,000 to the College to start a development fund. In 2005, in recognition of Dr Wong's commitment, the college Convocation Tapestry was commissioned with the sum to remember his pivotal role in the formation of the Institute.

PUBLIC SERVICE

At the national level, Dr Wong also contributed dedicated services to his country. He served tirelessly at the Public Service Commission (PSC) from 1970 to mid-1973 as a member, and then from mid-1973 to 1994 as Deputy Chairman, where he played a key role in recruiting and managing talented people in the civil service, and was also instrumental in the appointment and promotion of key personnel and selection of scholars. In addition, he was a member of the Singapore Telephone Board from 1969 to 1971, and Legal Service Commission from mid-1973 to 1994. Dr Wong also chaired the Ministry of Health's Committee for selection of part-time Honorary Consultants for government hospitals from 1974 to 1978.

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

For his contributions and services to our nation and country, the Singapore Government awarded Dr Wong the Public Service Star (BBM) in 1983, and the Meritorious Service Medal (PJG) in 1989.

Having gone into private general practice very early in his career, Dr Wong did not have the opportunity, like his peers, to pursue and acquire multiple postgraduate degrees. In spite of this, academic colleges and professional organisations and bodies have recognised his skills, knowledge, depth, views and thoughts of medicine as can be seen by the fellowship awards and invitations to honorary memberships awarded to him. Dr Wong Heck Sing was admitted into the Academy of Medicine in Singapore in 1975, the same year the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners awarded him the honorary FRACGP. In 1980, he was awarded the FCGP by the College of Family Physicians in Singapore. In 1998, Dr Wong was made an honorary member of the Singapore Medical Association for his contribution to society and to the profession.⁴

MM Lee Kuan Yew had this to say of him: "I have known Dr Wong for many decades. The Singapore Government and I would like to place his public service on record."

Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean said: "We owe a great deal to Dr Wong for having nurtured a whole generation of upright civil servants. He helped to set the values we live by today."⁵



A/Prof Goh Lee Gan was President of SMA (1999-2000), Editor of *SMA News* (1983-98) and present President of the College of Family Physicians.



A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean was President of SMA (1996-99), Editor of *SMA News* (2000-02), President College (2001-2006) and had the privilege of practising alongside Dr Wong Heck Sing from 1992 to 1996.

RETIREMENT YEARS

Dr Wong practised together with his wife, Dr Pat Wong, until 1996. In his retirement years, Dr Wong continued to keep in touch with continuing medical education and the College's development. He bore his final illness bravely. His wife said he never complained.

Dr Wong is survived by his wife, Dr Pat Wong, his three children, Professor Mark Wong, Professor John Wong, and Dr Jill Wong, daughters-in-law Marlene and Kwong Hui, and his grandchildren: Alexandra, Christopher, Denise, Lindsay and Matthew.

His son, Professor John Wong, Dean of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine had this to say of his father's legacy to his three children and five grandchildren: "He wanted to leave us with a moral compass – that we all had a responsibility to try and help people who were less fortunate."⁵

AN INSPIRING ROLE MODEL

Dr Wong Heck Sing, in his journey of life, has reminded each of us once again of the lines Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-72) wrote:

*"Life of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time."*

In the 1997 SMA Lecture, Dr Wong wrote on the need to inspire a whole generation of new doctors through their role models. By his life and deeds, Dr Wong is such a role model.

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