

SMA NEWS



INTERVIEW WITH Dr Andrew Chew

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

Dr Andrew Chew graduated from King Edward VII Medical School in 1955. He was Medical Superintendent at Thomson Road General Hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, KK Hospital and Singapore General Hospital before taking up the position of Deputy Director of Medical Services (Hospitals Division) in 1971. Dr Chew was subsequently promoted to Permanent Secretary/Director of Medical Services. His next appointment was as Head of Civil Service from 1984 to 1994, where he served as Permanent Secretary (Public Service Division) in the Ministry of Finance, and concurrently, Permanent Secretary (Special Duties) in the Prime Minister's Office. Upon retiring, Dr Chew served as Chairman of the Central Provident Fund and Chairman of the Public Service Commission. For his significant contributions to the Singapore Public Service, Dr Chew was awarded the Public Administration Medal (Gold) in 1975, the Meritorious Service Medal in 1994 and the Distinguished Service Order in 2002. He was also conferred Honorary Fellowship of the Academy of Medicine in 2004 and the Order of Nila Utama (Second Class) in 2008. Currently, Dr Chew is a Member of the Presidential Council of Minority Rights, and also the Pro-Chancellor of NUS.

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Trustworthiness may be the key answer here. By and large, the political leadership has proven itself honest so that has been already well-entrenched. The administrative leadership does exactly the same – we look not for intelligence, but rather, honesty and a willingness to take responsibility.

Dr Toh Han Chong: What are your best memories of medical school that you remember to this day?

Dr Andrew Chew: I had always wanted to study medicine; it was something I had decided on very early in life, even during my school days. During the Japanese Occupation, I had been to school at Monk's Hill for a year before it closed but I somehow managed to get hold of a few medical texts, which fanned my interest further.

For me, medicine was something I wanted to do – I joined the Overseas Chinese Bank temporarily but declined when a more permanent position was offered. The King Edward VII Medical School then served Singapore, Malaya (both the federated and un-federated states), Sarawak and British North Borneo. These were the people I met when I was there; I used to play rugby with PM Mahathir, who was one year my senior. We were closely knit through the hostel, medical and sporting groups.

THC: You have been appointed to many senior administrative services, initially in the medical services and later at a national level. What are your administrative experiences, and do you ever miss clinical practice?

AC: There were a fixed number of positions during my time, and only one super-scale post in any particular field. I joined Dr Seah Cheng Siang as

a senior registrar before moving into an administrative post in my tenth year, and was asked to run a hospital. I did so for about three years before applying for another position in a clinical setting. My interviewer was the late Dr Phay Seng Whatt, who used to be the Chairman of the Public Service Commission (PSC). We had a chat and I decided that I would give up the clinical post despite the opportunity.

Even then, I still had strong interest in clinical practice but I had ample opportunities as a hospital administrator. Even as an administrator, I was quite reluctant to move beyond hospitals because I wanted to be situated in a clinical setting. Somehow, after administering at the then-Thomson Road General Hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, KK Hospital and Singapore General Hospital, I ended up in the Ministry of Health as Deputy Director of Medical Services (Hospitals Division).

Prior to this, Dr Yong Nyuk Lin, the then-Minister of Health asked me to join him but I declined. Later, when Dr Yeoh Seang Aun wanted to retire, I ended up in the hospital's division. I remember receiving a phone call by Dr Yong Nyuk Lin, who had become Minister of Transport, saying that he was not offended when I had refused his job offer but took it up later. I never thought of the situation that way, but it was very decent of him.

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When the then-DMS, Eddie Ho, transferred to the Ministry of Social Affairs, I was requested to take his place. I ran MOH for 10 years and the then-Prime Minister made it clear that he would not stop me from clinical practice. Thereafter, he wanted me to move beyond the medical field and gave me three days to consider. I sought the advice of Sim Kee Boon, head of Civil Service, and Minister Howe Yoon Chong, who was previously also head of Civil Service. Both of them concluded that there was no reason not to take up the job, and I agreed. I ended up as head of Civil Service but on hindsight, I may have consulted the wrong persons as both of them may have been the ones who decided on me in the first place!

By the time I retired, I had spent ten years as DMS, doubling as Permanent Secretary as well, and ten years in the Ministry of Finance and in the Prime Minister's Office. When I retired, it was decided that I should continue as Chairman of the Central Provident Fund Board, where I served for four years before becoming Chairman of the PSC. I stayed on as PSC Chairman for another ten years before I officially retired!

THC: Are you holding any other positions now?

AC: I have lesser activities now, due to difficulty in managing without a secretarial office. Today, I hold two offices on a part-time basis. I am a Member of the Presidential Council of Minority Rights, and also the Pro-Chancellor of NUS.

Initially, I was asked to be the Pro-Chancellor of NTU, but I apologised to Prof Cham Tao Soon, explaining that I did not see it fit as NTU is mainly an engineering school. A couple of years later, Prof Lim Pin rang me up and offered me the post of Pro-Chancellor for NUS. I tried to explain that I could not accept after having rejected the previous one, but he was insistent – he proposed



(Photo credit: Public Service Commission)

that as a medical graduate of NUS, I had stronger ties and reasons to take up the offer. I ended up being talked into becoming Pro-Chancellor!

THC: Doctors seem to be trusted and placed in various prominent positions by the local government – do physicians have certain appealing qualities, or is this merely a coincidence?

AC: In the early days, higher education was not easily available to all, perhaps due to cost or faculty size. Thus, the cream of the crop tended to enter medical school and that is where the leadership selected its people from.

We also must not forget that outstanding, non-medically trained persons were also picked from Raffles College. On the medical side, names do tend to emerge easily due to the smaller cohort.

THC: Amidst discussions of operationalising the medical system, do you think a non-doctor can do a good job in running hospitals or healthcare?

AC: I have always opined that it is easier to change a doctor into an administrator rather than vice versa. When I was seeking advice from Minister Howe Yoon Chong, he remarked that one only needs common sense and good judgment, and that is very true.

I faced this issue as well, because I was looking for successors for the health field and beyond. Looking at international examples, all hospitals in Scotland were run by doctors – never by lay administrators. In London, it was the opposite. When I was at St Thomas', there was an anaesthetist representing the medical professionals, the lay professionals, and myself; a person interested in the process. I saw much

confrontation between the medical and lay professionals, and also discovered that it is not easy to manage doctors, but doctors dislike being managed by non-doctors!

Different experiences will influence management but I would say that generally, doctors feel more confident when being managed by doctors. Non-doctors are of course mindful of this, but some do a better job than others. It is likely that we will continue to see a mixture of both, but my own preference is someone who is well-respected. As long as a lay administrator recognises that he has to work hard in managing doctors, he will be successful.

THC: What has brought you most satisfaction from being a leader in the healthcare sector?

AC: Being able to introduce a multiplying factor is something that I feel most satisfied about. Teaching is an important component in any professional job – if I can teach, or can identify people who are able to teach well; I would have produced a multiplier effect.

When I became DMS, I enjoyed helping the university identify ideal candidates to join the medical school. I hoped that this would help to produce more good doctors. I continued this approach when I was Chairman of the PSC because medical or otherwise, one's value to the country as an administrator or as a teacher-researcher has to be closely looked at.

Being able to work closely with the clinical side so as to bring about skill enhancement has been something that I have enjoyed. For example, I was very pleased to help out in the area of skin grafts and tissue cultures. We were very keen on helping Professor Robert Pho in bone grafts under hand orthopaedics, and to support the development of skin tissue culture technique so as to manage burn patients – skin tissue from burn

patients in Jakarta would be cultured in Singapore before being flown back to Jakarta for their surgeons to graft. This satisfaction was something that I was able to continue, even when I moved beyond the medical field.

I often use Lee Seng Teik as an example to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – he is a Malaysian and Singapore PR who does his work while carrying our flag. He is very effective, and will go to various pharmaceutical companies to

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request for drugs that are soon-to-expire, approach SIA for free tickets and provide aid to nearby countries. He is the sort of person I enjoy working with.

THC: What are your thoughts on doctors migrating out of Singapore?

AC: We cannot fight the commercial side. Our health ministry went through

some anxious moments, and when they predicted the communist domino effect, the Australians were very keen on recruiting those with MBBS (Singapore) certificates. When the Australian register opened, it was not surprising to see a plane full of doctors flying there to register just in case they had to migrate. We are highly sought after in the Commonwealth countries, and this is why we have to ensure that our standards never falter.

It is painful when we lose people. When you think about each graduating class having 5-10% leaving, they may be doing so out of unhappiness. Today, we are talking about attracting talent instead, so the mindsets from the previous years have now changed, partly due to the bad experiences we've had.

THC: Talent is one of our resources; how do we manage the tension between the locals and foreigners in a small country?

AC: It is the politician's role to be very careful. I remember that even as head of Civil Service, the issue of keeping ethnic balance was difficult to avoid – we were always discussing how to attract Indian and Malay talent.

It was interesting to find out that there were Malay populations in Australia and South Africa, but we could never attract them back due to religious and cultural reasons. We did manage to attract many Indians from the UK into the IT section, via the idea of Singapore's cultural similarity and our proximity to India.

We had no problems attracting Chinese from Hong Kong, but I think they made use of us more than we did them. Our efforts in attracting talent started in 1987; as we knew they would not come in 1997 when Hong Kong reverted back to the People's Republic of China – the world was their oyster. We set our sights on blue collar workers,

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extended a “landed PR” and even established a “Kowloon Club” that still exists today. Later on, it was discovered that many Chinese would arrive with their daughters, but not their sons. Citizenship was offered to Chinese talents after five years to recognise their contributions. In their sixth year, we realised that many of them had migrated to the US. The Green Card was over-subscribed in Hong Kong but under-subscribed in Singapore; the talents were very patient. Not all have left – in the end, we win some and we lose some.

THC: Were these efforts designed to boost our population numbers, in view of our low replacement rates?

AC: When we embarked on our “Stop at Two” campaigns, we were warned by Professor S S Ratnam that our population might drop too much. China has generally been successful with its one child policy, but they may face issues in the next two decades because the population would have shrunk by a lot. Also, they do have more males than females, which will give rise to social problems.

India, on the other hand, has failed in its family planning policies. However, they will be more successful due to their economic manpower.

THC: India and China are considered polarised – one is considered to be endowed with the rule of law and the English language while the other relies on organised central command. Which do you think will fare better in the next decade?

AC: I would think the rule of law and grasp of English does shorten the road to development. However, India is not without its problems – being left with the British policies of division and rule meant that dissent would curb its national growth. Then again, the

One must not prove efficiency by rushing through matters. I believe that in order to progress, one will inevitably make mistakes, but we should keep them at a minimum.

Indians are brilliant people; well known to the rest of the world. They have also been fortunate in embracing Western-type education, and are endowed with the ability to do good work particularly in IT and Mathematics.

China too will be successful, but at a decreasing rate. China is revising its law court; they are inventors, but perhaps the issue is one of trust.

THC: Laypersons always view the Civil Service as being bureaucratic and inflexible, can you convince us otherwise?

AC: This can be explained by the lay public who are dealing with the front end personnel, who often have little discretion. And people who approach the counters come from all walks of life and are of ranging intelligence. Discretion tends to be given with increasing hierarchy. There is a great need for people in the upper ranks of the Civil Service to interact with those from the private sector.

When Lee Kuan Yew was Prime Minister, he advised his Ministers to take up golf, and this saw many of them attempting the game. I took his cue and also appointed senior civil servants with club memberships at Sentosa, Keppel and Tanah Merah. This was so they could meet up and interact with people from the private sector.

Today, there is less time for interaction. Perhaps we should keep front-line publicity on politicians rather than civil servants to avoid another Tan Yong Soon situation. If the public feels that there is a lack of discretion, then we must have more dialogue. However, it is hard to satisfy everybody.

THC: What has resulted in the decreasing interaction?

AC: I think senior civil servants do not have time to interact with people because they are too busy. Person-to-person interaction is always a good opportunity to really see somebody. I would like to see our senior people having more leisure time; I felt that I did not have much of that during my term in the PSC. Every night, I would have to time myself so as to finish reading a number of papers. Looking at the senior administrative staff, it would be wise for them to plan leisure time for themselves; else they will get caught up in their work.

THC: There seems to be a push towards progressive and innovative thinking in education, finance and the trade industry now.

AC: Progress comes in spurts, for example the push to make IT widespread by Phillip Yeo. We expect things to be accomplished faster today

than before, and the public may feel left out at times. However, having too many consultations will hinder the speed of progress. This may attribute to reduced contact time with the people, and give rise to a danger of mistakes being made – one must not prove efficiency by rushing through matters. I believe that in order to progress, one will inevitably make mistakes, but we should keep them at a minimum.

THC: Given the latest AWARE saga, do you think we will see more Singaporeans willing to stand for their causes?

AC: I think this is natural development that comes with more people being better educated. Looking at the sex ratio in tertiary education, there are more females than males. These womenfolk seem to mature faster in early life, and are making strong contributions that cannot be ignored.

In fact, if you are a politician, you would look at AWARE very closely and question if you have missed out the female vote.

THC: Will a strong and vibrant Civil Service contribute to the success of Singapore, in spite of whatever leadership that is in place?

AC: Trustworthiness may be the key answer here. By and large, the political leadership has proven itself honest so that has been already well-entrenched. The administrative leadership does exactly the same – we look not for intelligence, but rather, honesty and a willingness to take responsibility. I think that as long as this is in place, it will be hard to break the practice.

We are known to have a good and reliable Civil Service. It is no use having strong political leadership without strong administrative support. Both have to go hand in hand – if one

is corrupt, sooner or later, the other will follow.

It is noteworthy that we have many honest people as well as the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) directly responsible to the Prime Minister. The appointment of people to vantage positions is important and depends on the consensus of a few minds. Therefore, in the appointment of senior positions; there are at least a dozen members in the PSC. I would say that for the next two generations, we can be confident that good people are in place.

THC: How does the Civil Service deal with the issue of outliers who may speak against the system?

AC: There is nothing to say that one cannot disagree with the system but at the same time, one cannot sabotage all these policies. One should be politicised to be aware of the goings-on but one cannot be political. If one is political, then that person should not be in that job. This is the reason why no civil servant can be an active political party member – if anyone wants to stand for elections, then he or she will have to leave the Civil Service.

A civil servant can have differing views but he or she will also have to accept the dominant view.

THC: Have there been any major influences that shaped your life or belief system?

AC: It is the most striking events that mould a person. I used to admire how Chief Justice Yong Pung How went off the beaten path in making his decisions. As Chairman of the Institute of Policy Studies and Vice-Chairman of OCBC Bank, he would always question if he had fulfilled his worth. This is a man who is very conscious of his responsibilities. Dr Goh Keng Swee was said to only

read papers written by authors he knew and trusted as he did not want to waste his time.

These are anecdotes that one hears about others, and they provide suggestions that could be beneficial to oneself. Then again, there are many people in the world that I admire, but I could not do the same things they did. In this way, I would rather lead than be led.

THC: What sort of Singapore would you envision for your grandchildren?

AC: We are thinking of our own experiences, and I believe we should not shape things for others. When friends recount that their children have migrated overseas, I explain that this is because they feel that life away is better. Who are we to say that life here is better; they should discover this for themselves. I would still advise that the Singapore citizenship should not be given up too readily.

Life away may not be better, as there are many factors involved; the most important one being family ties and the family unit. For example, when Professor John Wong was offered Professorship in Cornell, he turned it down in order to be close to his father.

I appreciate the phrase “the grass is greener on the other side” in the literal sense. I was playing golf in Joondalup, Perth and my ball went into a beautiful green patch. When I crossed over to look for my ball, I realised that it only looked green from my side! Instead of being lush and green, it was sparse and filthy. The grass may appear to be greener on the other side but once you are there, it may not necessarily be true.

THC: Thank you for your insightful answers. 