

# SMA NEWS

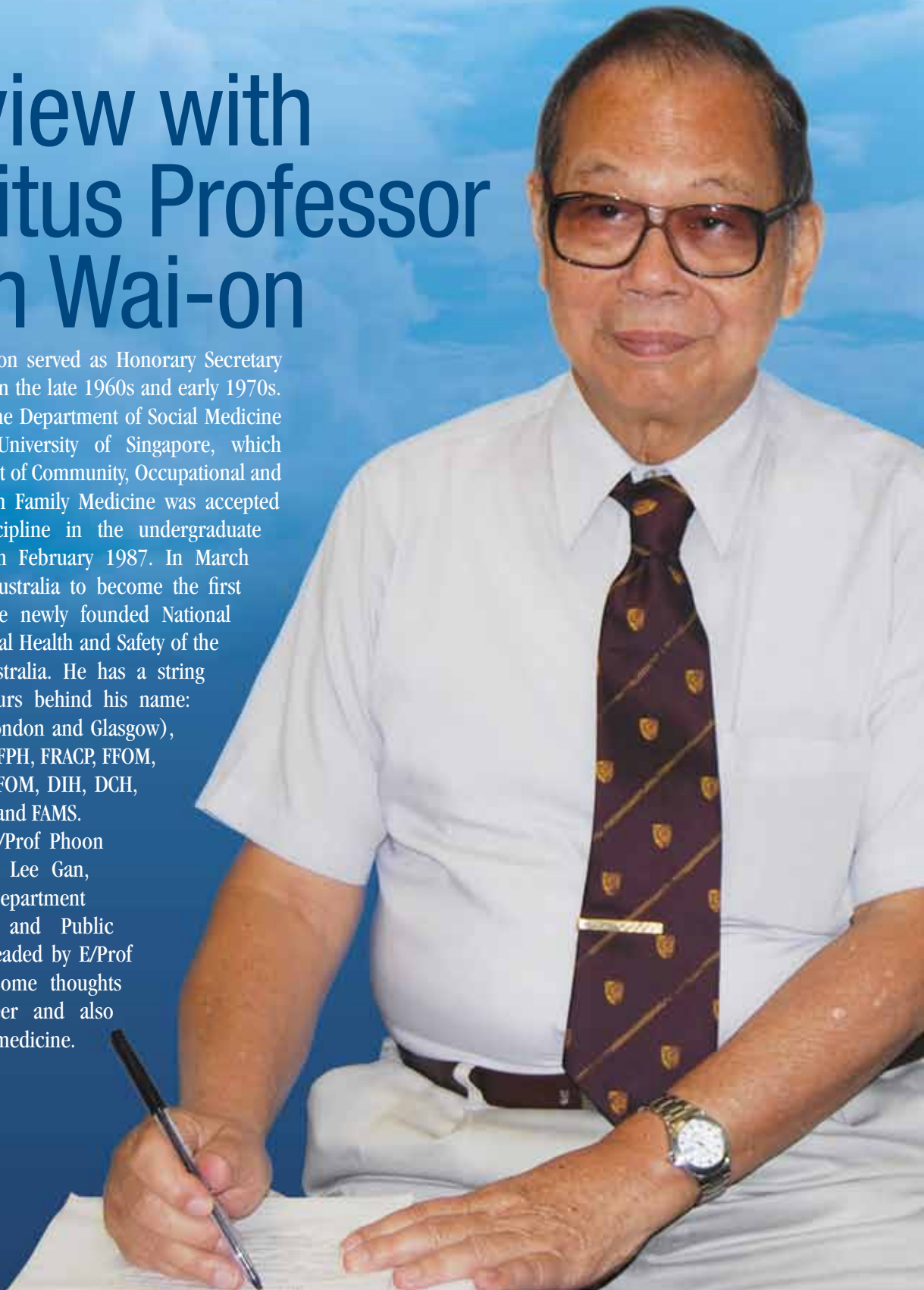


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## Interview with Emeritus Professor Phoon Wai-on

E/Prof Phoon Wai-on served as Honorary Secretary and President of SMA in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He was also Head of the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health, University of Singapore, which became the Department of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine, when Family Medicine was accepted as an academic discipline in the undergraduate medical curriculum in February 1987. In March 1987, he moved to Australia to become the first Acting Director of the newly founded National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety of the Commonwealth of Australia. He has a string of degrees and honours behind his name: AM, MB, BS, FRCP (London and Glasgow), FRCP (Paed) (Edin), FFPH, FRACP, FFOM, Hon FACOEM, Hon FAFOM, DIH, DCH, DIHSA, FRFPS, FAFRM and FAMS.

Recently retired, E/Prof Phoon spoke to A/Prof Goh Lee Gan, who was a staff at the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health when it was headed by E/Prof Phoon, and shared some thoughts on his medical career and also developments in local medicine.



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# Interview with Emeritus Professor Phoon Wai-on

**A/Prof Goh Lee Gan – GLG:** E/Prof Phoon, you certainly have a very impressive and colourful medical career that has spanned more than 50 years. You were also a President of SMA. Could you share with us a brief summary of your past SMA-related activities, your stint in serving in the professional committees, and also as Head of the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health?

**E/Prof Phoon Wai-on – PWO:** I was fortunate in gaining admission underaged and also to obtain a King Edward VII Entrance Scholarship (then the highest merit award into the Medical College). This was probably because I took top position in the School Leaving Examinations in Singapore and Malaya (Singapore was then part of Malaysia). I therefore have been able to pursue a significantly longer career as a doctor and university professor because of my head start.

I was President of SMA for two terms, and also served on the Council for about ten years, including one term as Honorary Secretary and two terms as President-Elect. I was the Founder-Chairman of the Society of Occupational Medicine (then a section of SMA) and Founder-Chairman of the Singapore Professional Centre (of which SMA was a constituent member for many years), and for which I was elected Honorary Chairman for life.

I was a member of the Committee on Medical Specialisation appointed by the Minister of Health to pinpoint the directions of medical specialisations. That Committee included Dr BH Sheares, later President of Singapore, among others. Highlights of my tenures as SMA President include representing in Parliament SMA's views on the

liberalisation of abortion laws, and fighting for the continuation of doctors' rights to provide medicines directly to patients.

I was also an inaugural member of the Public Health Licensing Board, appointed by the Minister, which laid down the foundations of the public health laws now current in Singapore.

When I was Honorary Secretary of SMA, the SMA Council inaugurated the annual SMA Conventions, which I believe are still run currently. I was SMA Lecturer at a subsequent Convention in 1972.

As Professor of Social Medicine and Public Health at the University of Singapore for 17 years, I established the degrees of Master of Science in Occupational Health and Public Health, and was also Founder-Chairman of the Chapter of Community Medicine and Occupational Medicine of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore.

**GLG:** Going down memory lane, how has Singapore's healthcare system, as you have gathered from your personal knowledge, changed since the time you were Head of Department of Social Medicine and Public Health (during the 1970s to 1980s) in view of social medicine and public health developments?

**PWO:** As far as I know, Singapore's healthcare system still consists of primary healthcare delivered by general practitioners in private practice or in government polyclinics, and hospital care largely financed by Medisave for patients who have funds and by the State for the indigent. Most hospitals are either state-owned but run by independent managements; or private, run on commercial bases; or as charities. Probably the most

significant changes are Medisave and the increased number of private hospitals, many catering to overseas as well as local patients.

**GLG:** What are the woes of today's general practitioners that you have heard or read about, through your personal communication with general practitioners in Singapore?

**PWO:** I have never been a general practitioner as such. However, from 1963 to 1970 I was practising Occupational Medicine as well

the government does not provide primary healthcare services (except in remote areas and special circumstances), unlike in Singapore, where government clinics look after a sizeable proportion of those needing primary care.

**GLG:** It is interesting that you were in the fight for GPs to retain dispensing rights. What are your views on the evolution of specialisation and the role of today's specialists and specialist training?

number of the Annals of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore on Ageing (Geriatrics and Gerontology), a rather exotic subject at that time. I recruited a geriatrician, Dr Anne Merriman, to my erstwhile department, and she helped to promote Geriatrics in Singapore.

**GLG:** Tell us the role you played in postgraduate training, and your views on its past, present and future.

**PWO:** Postgraduate training for doctors started with the Diploma of Public Health at the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health, in the then University of Malaya. I became Professor and Head of that Department in 1970. In 1972 we started the Master of Science degrees for Public Health and Occupational Medicine, the first such degrees in Southeast Asia. For several decades after that, we had large numbers of postgraduate students coming for those degrees from Southeast Asian nations, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and so on. Since then, the degrees have changed their names and most neighbouring countries have their own degrees.

I also served on the then Board of Postgraduate Medical Studies (catered to the clinical disciplines), which subsequently evolved into the School of Medicinal Studies. Initially, the conduct of courses and examinations drew largely the support of specialists from other countries, notably Australia. In recent years, Singapore has mostly stood on its own feet, although it has also adopted the practice of participating in examinations for overseas royal colleges of physicians and surgeons.

**GLG:** What are your personal and professional experiences in working overseas?

**PWO:** I was privileged to be invited to assume the position of the inaugural Acting Director of the newly founded National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1987 (which I held for four years). Simultaneously, I was invited to fill the posts of Chair of Occupational Health at the University of

Mr Chua Sian Chin, then Minister for Health, set up in the late 1960s a special committee to plan the development of medical specialties in Singapore. Dr BH Sheares and I were in that committee. We made several observations and recommendations as to which medical and dental subspecialties should be developed, and in what sequence. I think Singapore has progressed very much in recent years in training and developing specialties.

as looking after the primary and secondary healthcare of a sizeable community in the Shell oil refinery on Pulau Bukom, as well as six to eight neighbouring islands. I think General (or Family) Practice can be very satisfying and stimulating. However, it is perhaps more subject to economic vagaries and social changes than hospital medicine. When I was Honorary Secretary and President of the SMA in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we fought hard to retain the right of doctors to dispense medicines to patients. We won. In Australia, doctors merely prescribe but pharmacists supply the medicines. On the other hand, in Australia

**PWO:** Mr Chua Sian Chin, then Minister for Health, set up in the late 1960s a special committee to plan the development of medical specialties in Singapore. Dr BH Sheares and I were in that committee. We made several observations and recommendations as to which medical and dental subspecialties should be developed, and in what sequence. I think Singapore has progressed very much in recent years in training and developing specialties. For example, in 1987 (when I left for Australia), there was only one small unit in Rehabilitation Medicine at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Today, there are such units in most hospitals. In 1987, I also edited a special

Sydney (which I held for ten years) and Head of Department in that discipline.

After serving as Head in the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health in Singapore from 1970 to 1987, it was a new challenge for me to help develop Occupational Health in another country. The last two actions I took before I left Singapore in March 1987 was to change the name of my department to that of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine, and to get Dr Goh Lee Gan appointed to its staff. History has since proven that Lee Gan was a leading figure in establishing Family Medicine as an important discipline, and in upgrading its standards of practice.

My family and I have never suffered from any perceptible discrimination in Australia. On my retirement, I was conferred the title of Emeritus Professor (only

the second on an Asian in the University of Sydney's 160 years of history). I was also conferred Honorary Fellowships of the Australasian College of Occupational Medicine and the Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

Internationally, I have served as Chairman of the International Labour Organization/World Health Organization Joint Expert Committee on Occupational Health, and am currently the National Secretary for Australia of the International Committee on Occupational Health.

**GLG:** How do you stay fit and healthy?

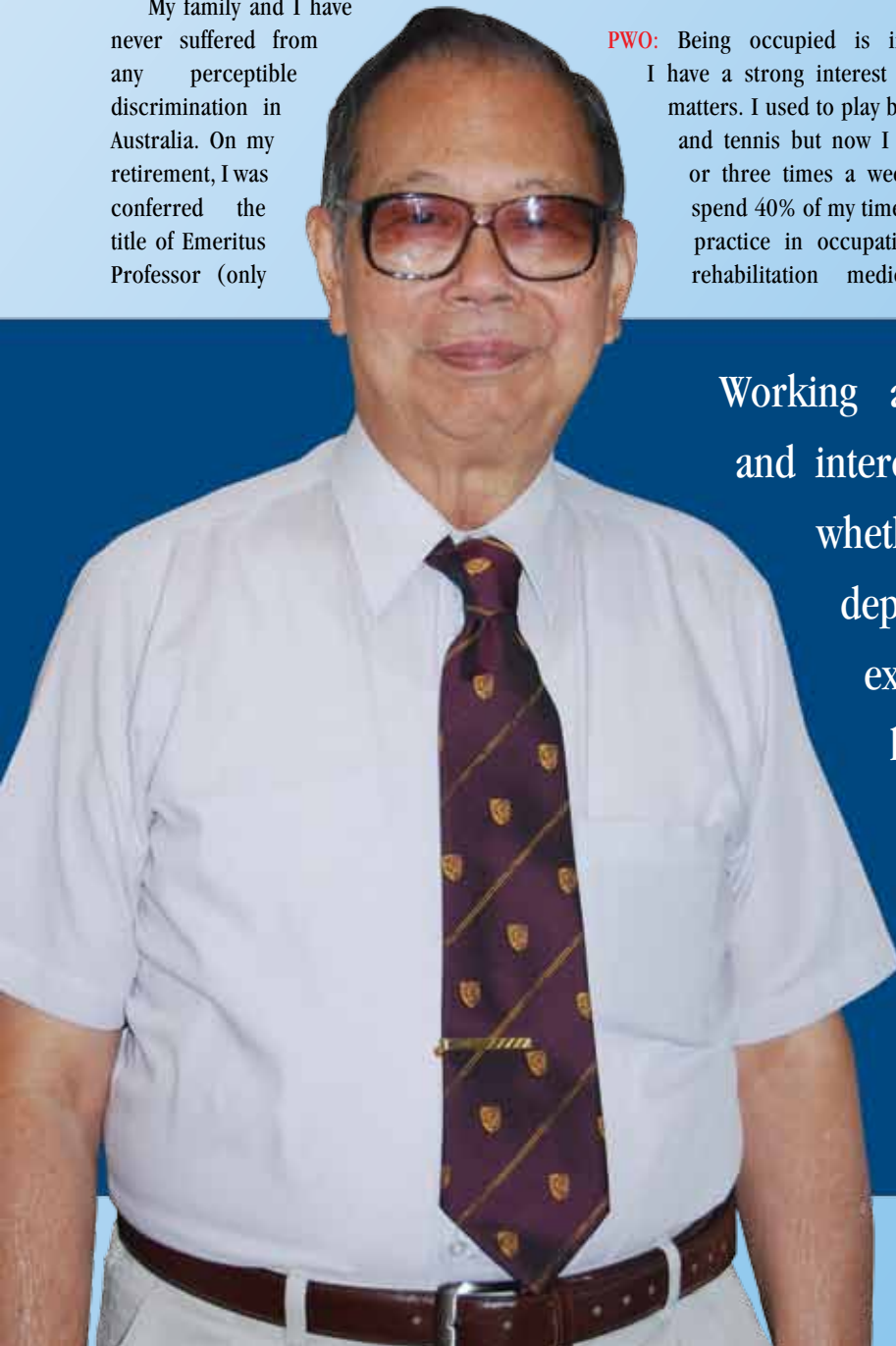
**PWO:** Being occupied is important. I have a strong interest in health matters. I used to play badminton and tennis but now I walk two or three times a week. I still spend 40% of my time in active practice in occupational and rehabilitation medicine, as

well as in an occupational allergy clinic. I see patients in Westmead Hospital, Yagoona Medical Centre, and Liverpool Medical Centre in Sydney.

**GLG:** Thanks E/Prof Phoon for sharing your experiences, views, and observations. Any other thoughts?

**PWO:** Working abroad has been an invigorating and interesting experience for me. However, whether working abroad would suit others depends largely on the personality and experience of the doctor and whether his or her spouse and family can adjust to a rather different way of life and social circumstances. There is no such thing as a Paradise on Earth. Otherwise, why should we be looking towards Heaven?

**GLG:** Thank you E/Prof Phoon for the stimulating conversation. A medical career can certainly be exciting, adventurous, and fulfilling. You have shown us how you have achieved that. Best wishes. **SMA**



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