

# SMA NEWS



VOLUME 43 No.04 APRIL 2011  
MICA (P) 169/02/2011

**“I CAME  
OVER HERE  
BECAUSE  
I WANT  
TO MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE”**

**INTERVIEW WITH  
PROFESSOR  
SALLY CHAN**



# SMA NEWS

VOLUME 43  
NO.04 APRIL 2011

## EDITORIAL BOARD

### EDITOR

Dr Toh Han Chong

### DEPUTY EDITOR

Dr Tan Yia Swam

### MEMBERS

Dr Martin Chio  
A/Prof Daniel Fung  
Dr Jayant V Iyer  
Dr Lim Boon Leng  
Dr Jeremy Lim  
Dr Tan Poh Kiang  
Dr Teo Eng Swee Cuthbert

### EX-OFFICIOS

Dr Chong Yeh Woei  
Dr Wong Tien Hua

### ASSISTANT EDITORIAL MANAGER

Ms Gracia Ong

### EDITORIAL EXECUTIVE

Ms Denise Yuen

*The views and opinions expressed in all the articles are those of the authors. These are not the views of the Editorial Board nor the SMA Council unless specifically stated so in writing. The contents of the Newsletter are not to be printed in whole or in part without prior written approval of the Editor.*

Published by the

**Singapore Medical Association,**  
Level 2, Alumni Medical Centre,  
2 College Road, Singapore 169850  
Tel: 6223 1264  
Fax: 6224 7827

Email: [news@sma.org.sg](mailto:news@sma.org.sg)  
URL: <http://www.sma.org.sg>  
SMA Reg. No.: ROS 198/59 TAP

For classified advertisements, professional announcements and other advertising enquiries, please contact SMA.

Professor Sally Chan currently heads the Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She was previously a nursing professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Prof Chan completed her basic nursing training and nursing education diploma in Hong Kong (HK), and obtained her bachelor's degree in Australia, and her master's degree and doctorate in the United Kingdom (UK).

**SMA:** We understand that you were born in HK and did your basic training there. Over the years you also obtained advanced degrees from Australia and the UK. What made you decide to move to Singapore?

**Prof Sally Chan – SC:** Actually I've never actively tried to leave HK, because I was born and raised in HK, and the majority of my career was established there. But when I knew that there was a position available in NUS, I thought it was good because I knew that in Singapore, tertiary education for nurses is still very new. In fact in HK, I've already gone through the process of how to enhance nursing education from being hospital-based to university, so I thought my experience might help in the development of nursing in Singapore. Thus, I thought that it was a good opportunity to come over and work. Also I had worked in HK for many years, so it would be good to take this challenge and change my work environment and see how it goes. I have been in Singapore for just over a year, as I arrived on 16 January last year. I feel very privileged to work and contribute to nursing education in Singapore. I've learnt a lot; different systems have their own strengths and weaknesses. It is good that I can work here and learn the system here and appreciate its uniqueness.

**SMA:** We've read that you are interested in the field of mental health and psychosocial care. How did your interest in this field arise?

**SC:** Yes, I was a mental health nurse. We have to go a long way back to find out why I joined nursing. I did not dream of becoming a nurse when I was a little girl. Even when I was in secondary school I never thought that I would be a nurse one day. But while I was in secondary school, I got sick and was hospitalised for quite some time. During my hospitalisation, I observed nurses working and really liked it as they were very knowledgeable, skilful and caring. So I thought that it would be a good

choice of occupation, and developed an interest in nursing.

When I was in Form 6 (equivalent to the second year of junior college in Singapore), I visited a mental hospital on a trip organised by my school. Before I went there, I did not know that there were nurses working at the mental hospital. There, I observed the nurses and patients. I was very attracted to what the nurses did; some may consider that a calling. I thought it would be good if I could become a nurse and help those patients with mental health problems. I regarded a nurse's role more important than a doctor's. The doctors came into the ward, gave consultation to patients, and then they went away, but the nurses stay 24 hours a day with the patients. If I became a nurse I could help the patients to recover. That was the reason I was drawn to mental health.

At that time nurses' training in HK followed the British system, that is, you specialised when you started your basic training in, say, mental health nursing or general nursing. When I started my basic nurse training, I chose to go into mental health; that was how I ended up there.

At that time, mental health carried a lot of stigma, and it still does. When I told my friends and family that I wanted to be a mental health nurse, they had reservations, but still supported me. I started my basic training in a hospital-based school, which lasted three years and was uneventful. I enjoyed it very much. My training was considered "Florence Nightingale" style as it was highly disciplined. We had to stay in the nurses' quarters and could only go home during weekends. We also had to spend a long time in clinical practice. It was hard work as you had to study and work in the wards.

We talk about nursing shortages here nowadays, but at that time, there was an acute, acute nursing shortage! So, as nursing students we had to take up a lot of responsibilities. I remember on my first night duty, I was in charge of a forensic ward. Yes, they were that short of manpower, so I had to do it. Of course, as a student nurse, I was backed up by qualified nurses in other units. As I was given a lot of responsibilities, I matured very quickly. Even if I had not been taught something before, I had to try to learn to do it well on the job. That sort of environment trained me to be very organised, efficient, and responsible. Of course we cannot compare the training of that time with that of the present day. Now students are well-protected, and they will not be thrown into this sort of situation. But on the other hand, they do not have the opportunities to meet such challenges



and mature in the process.

I did well in my training, and was top of the class in every examination. After graduation, I worked in a hospital as a registered nurse. I had experience working in different types of settings, such as forensics, acute admissions and psychogeriatrics. After a few years, although I enjoyed working in clinical settings, I felt that I needed to move on, as I was dissatisfied with where I was. I wanted to go for further training. At that time the HK government offered scholarships to train nurses to become nurse teachers. Because of my good performance in the wards and my strong motivation to move on, the HK government gave me a two-year full-time scholarship to study nursing education. It was not a degree, but a post-registration diploma in nursing education. I got through those two years, and became a nurse teacher in the school of nursing in a hospital. At that time, I progressed very fast in my career, and was promoted to Nursing Officer Class 1, equivalent to an Assistant Director of Nursing now, at the relatively young age of 30.

But still, I was not satisfied and wanted to move on. I resigned from my job and went abroad to study. At that time everyone said that I was so foolish: I was doing well, I was employed in such a high position, I had nothing to worry as the job was permanent, and I could move up the career ladder easily. But I had some sort of internal motivation and drive to do something, and I wanted to study so I went to the UK to do my masters and PhD. When I returned I started working in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and then moved to CUHK. It was like a fresh start: when I first joined the university, I was the most junior person. I restarted my career and progressed there.

**SMA:** What made you decide on this career change, switching from nursing to teaching?

**SC:** I was very happy in my clinical career. In fact, when I look back on my career, my clinical days were the happiest as I enjoyed offering direct help to patients. My career in education is also enjoyable but much more rewarding. I thought that if I had the opportunity to educate future nurses, I might be able to influence more people so that they could help patients, rather than doing it myself, as there were limits to what I could do. If I could nurture more competent, motivated and devoted nurses, they could help patients and contribute more than me. That was

the main reason why I moved to education.

I love teaching. I enjoy being with my students and watching them grow and develop. It is very satisfying to see them turn from being very green to very confident; then they graduate and work in hospitals, and become totally different people. In fact, I still maintain contact with many of my old students. Many of them have become my lifelong friends.

**SMA:** What are some of the best lessons you have learnt from the mentors who have influenced you the most, and also from your students?

**SC:** I had a lot of good mentors both in clinical settings and during my studies, for example, my PhD supervisor Professor Helen Bartlett, now the Pro Vice-Chancellor and President of Monash University (Gippsland campus). I learnt from them that if you want to be successful, there are no shortcuts. It is hard work, hard work and more hard work. You must be committed to what you are doing, be focused, work hard and always strive for the highest standard, then you will have a successful career. Opportunities only present themselves to those who are well-prepared. That is what I always tell my students: that you must show that you are committed and willing to work hard, then you will be given opportunities and you shouldn't be calculative. I notice that some young people nowadays are too keen on comparing themselves with others when it comes to responsibilities and work. They say, "Why do I have to do this but they don't? Why do I have to do more than other people?" But I always tell them not to be calculative, because if people ask you to do something, it means that they trust you and think you have the ability to do it. So take up the responsibility happily and do it well, and you can gain credibility. You must be ready for hard work and show that you are committed and motivated to do the job.

As for my students, I also learnt a lot from them. I always think that students are very creative. I have been in nursing for such a long time that my mind is a bit fixed. I am a very well-organised person, but my shortcoming is that I sometimes need more creativity. My students are very creative in the ways they look at nursing, or in their suggestions on how we can promote nursing and our programmes. They contribute a lot of good ideas. I learnt to see nursing in a different perspective. I also learnt that students have a lot of potential. Some of them may not

excel in their studies, but after they graduate, they start to do well. They have the foundations, and then they blossom. I have seen many cases like that. That is why I believe given the right support, opportunities and environment, these young people will develop.

One of my ex-students in HK became a professor in nursing recently. Others have become nurse managers, specialists or advanced practice nurses. It is very satisfying to see your students develop and contribute to the nursing service. That is the great part of education.

**SMA:** What is your impression of local nurses, for example, the way they work as compared to nurses from elsewhere?

**SC:** I do not want to make too many comments as I have been here for only one year and will need to understand the local situation in greater depth. But I see a lot of potential in local nurses; they work hard and want to do well. This is very important. The majority of nurses I encounter understand that they have to catch up in terms of education, research and service development, for example, in evidence-based practice. As they have the motivation to do better, they find different ways to improve and advance themselves, which is very good.

Currently, most of the nursing education in Singapore is still transmitted in the polytechnics, at the diploma level, which is different from HK and other parts of the world. It is important to enhance the level of education for nurses due to complexity of care required by patients. I remember a nursing professor once commented that no one questions why doctors need to have degrees, but if you observe what nurses do in contemporary healthcare settings and the complexity of care they have to deal with, you begin to wonder why they do not have a degree. One of our goals should be enhancing the level of education for nurses so that they can contribute more to the healthcare system.

Sometimes it could be a vicious cycle. If nurses are not well-prepared for what they have to do in clinical settings, they may make mistakes and be blamed. If the system is not very

supportive, they will leave the service. Though a large number of local nurses are trained, many would leave the service. Then you have to employ many foreign nurses to make up the shortfall. If you prepare nurses well, give them the skills to deal with the challenges, they will perform and be satisfied with the results. If the system is also supportive, then they will stay on.

**SMA:** As with the medical field, there are more foreign nurses working in public hospitals. What problems have these nurses encountered thus far, and how can we help ease their transition into the local system? For example, many patients are elderly and can speak



Prof Chan (far left) and nurse leaders demonstrating at the Governor's House in HK for more nursing degree places in 1992

only dialects, and the nurses from India and Philippines may not be able to communicate with them.

**SC:** The Singapore Nursing Board is the gatekeeper that it ensures only those who meet a minimum standard can register as a nurse. The employers also need to provide training to those they think need enhancement of skills. In clinical settings, we also have preceptors to provide support to the newcomers. I regard the employment of foreign nurses as a short-term solution. The government needs to plan long-term for this. How many nurses will we need 10 to 20 years down the road? How do we educate those nurses? How can we improve the system so that the nurses will stay?

Even in HK, many nurses are resigning nowadays. It is not that they don't like nursing – they are very passionate about it! But the unsupportive system has made them fed up. There are constant manpower shortages,

and nurses may at times have to take on non-nursing roles which made them frustrated. You need to look at the system to see what improvements can be made so that nurses can become happier and more satisfied. A lot of them are not working for money. They want job satisfaction and recognition, so if we can help them gain these, they will stay in the service, and this will help solve the manpower issue. I was surprised to learn that Singapore trains many nurses every year, but still suffers a shortage. There must be something wrong with the system as it is unable to retain nurses. The solution is multi-faceted: you have to improve the education system for nurses to become better educated, you can increase the intake of nursing students, but at the same time, we must also examine the system to see how they can be retained.

**SMA:** One observation we have made is that Singaporeans in general do not appreciate nurses, so we need to increase their prestige. We noticed some patients are very polite to doctors but treat nurses like maids. We feel that this is very unfair to them.

**SC:** Yes, that is the traditional image of nurses. My department is now implementing many strategies to promote our nursing programmes. It is also important to promote the image of nursing in Singapore. We want to let the public know that nurses are now well-educated and take on extended and expanded roles. Nurses are able to make decisions autonomously and work collaboratively with other healthcare professionals when caring for patients. They should no longer have the “handmaiden” image as they did in the past. We also need to let the public know about the current developments in nursing in Singapore, such as advanced practice nurses, and PhDs for nurses. I am optimistic that the public will change their mindset about what a nurse is.

Currently, we are organising many outreach programmes in junior colleges and secondary schools, such as career talks, to let the students know what nursing is, what nurses do, their career progression, options for further education and so on. However, we realised that promoting

nursing to students is not enough. It is also very important to promote it to their parents, because it is they who influence their children in choosing careers. We want to let the parents know that we now have a nursing department in NUS, and their children will be able to receive a university education, and become a well-educated nurse who is also well-respected.

**SMA:** In our own experience, we've seen nurses who've gone on to obtain degrees and those who specialise in wounds or stomas. There are also nurse practitioners who do alternate consultations at the polyclinics, and they are every bit as good as the doctors.

**SC:** In HK, a nurse specialist can move on to become a nurse consultant. They are knowledgeable, skilful and have a lot of autonomy in their work. With the right environment, we will be able to nurture more of such nurses, give them opportunities to demonstrate themselves, and let the public know that they are healthcare practitioners making significant contributions.

**SMA:** In our medical schools, we also invite nurses to give lectures as part of the curriculum, because our doctors are unfamiliar with some of the equipment used in hospitals.

**SC:** Yes, their expert knowledge, devotion to and passion for their profession is something we should all learn from.

**SMA:** What has brought you the most satisfaction in your professional journey?

**SC:** I am satisfied with many parts of my career. Of course, working with patients and seeing them recover is very satisfying. And in education, getting students' recognition is very rewarding. When I was teaching in CUHK, students had to vote for the Teacher of the Year, and I won that award five times. I also received a Master Teacher Award. It is not money, status or prestige, but recognition from students which is the most satisfying.

**SMA:** Wow. We must invite you to give lectures to

our medical students.

**SC:** I'm happy to share my experiences! When my students voted for me, they had to explain why they found me a good teacher. Many wrote that they found my lectures informative. I used a variety of presentation methods – in every lecture I screened videos and so on, and my presentations were lively. Many of them were impressed by my attitude towards the profession, and regarded me as a very committed nurse. I guess that was their impression and that was why they liked me. Many also said that I was a good role model for them. I was very happy, as this was not self-praise, but praise from



Prof Chan (third from right) with nursing students at NUS Open House in March this year

students, and that was truly satisfying.

**SMA:** What is one experience that has deeply impacted your life?

**SC:** When I look back on my life, there were a few experiences that had a great impact on me. For the first, we must go back to my childhood. I lost my mother when I was three years old. As a child, I really wanted my mother. But I learnt that there are things you cannot change; you just have to accept it. You have to be the master of your life and have the courage to move on even if there is no one beside you. I learnt this at a very young age.

As for the second, I was born into a Christian family, so I was connected to the church for the first part of my life. I am not a religious person, I must say; in fact I have left the church. When I was young, I attended church every Sunday, attended Sunday school and sang in the church choir for many years. When I was in the church,

the things I learnt shaped my character and outlook in life. My personal outlook is that I must have hope, courage, faith and joy in my life. I also learnt that having personal integrity is very important in no matter what your position is. You have to be honest and fair, and also follow your principles and what the Bible has taught. So my experience in church was an integral part of my formative years.

The third event that impacted me the most is my marriage. I am very lucky to marry a man who loves me more than I love myself. He made my life complete. I am very satisfied and there is nothing in this world that I really want more. I already have all the important things in my life.

These are not money or status, but love and support from someone.

**SMA:** How did you meet your husband?

**SC:** We studied together in the nursing education diploma programme in 1985 in HK, and we got married two months after we met during the course. It was very quick, so all my teachers and classmates were shocked. Our parents were also unhappy as well. But I guess it is not how long you know that person. He was the right one; I

think the feeling was so strong for both of us that we knew we should be with each other. This year is the 26th year of our marriage. When we married, many people said that our marriage would not last long, but we have proven them wrong.

When we married, one of our teachers told us, "You have to find your own happiness. Happiness will not come to you, so you have to work hard for it." You have to work hard for happiness and work hard to make your marriage a success. That was another thing I learnt from my teachers. Many of them have a lot of wisdom!

A lot of people asked me how I have the determination to do things, but when I look back on all the important decisions I have made in my life, for example, choosing to join nursing, or getting married, or coming to Singapore, they were all quick decisions. I knew the feeling, and that it was the right way to go. You can say that it is a passion: "Oh yes, I know

that I want to do it!" So I made the decision, and to do it, I put all my energy to make it happen and to make it successful. I knew what I wanted, and I did it. And then I put 100% or even 150% of effort to make it work.

**SMA:** Currently, what is your job scope like?

**SC:** I am now the head of the nursing department at NUS, so I have to provide leadership to my department in various aspects like developing high quality education programmes, facilitating the development of the faculty with regard to education, research and service, and act as a role model for faculty members. The biggest challenge is that we are a very young department; we only started in 2005. We have to constantly revise the curriculum to fit the local context, and we also have to recruit faculty. At the moment, the majority of professors in my department are foreigners. One of my targets is to groom local talents so that they can also reach this level and join us as a member of our faculty. That is very important. Although we would like to have an international faculty, since that is an important part of being an international university, we also would like to make sure that at least 60% of our faculty are locals.

Foreigners have different motivations and agendas for leaving their hometowns and coming here to work. Sometimes such situations are not that stable. Some may come with very high expectations and end up disappointed. Some may find that it is not what they want and move away. There was a lot of coming and going in our department for the past five years. Therefore I think it is important to develop locals as they are more likely to be committed and stay. Enhancing the quality of our programmes, recruiting good students into the programme, recruiting

committed faculty and developing research output of our department are by far my biggest challenges. But I enjoy challenges because I came over to Singapore to look for challenges. I don't expect to have a very stable department where everything is so established that I'd have nothing to do! I came over here because I want to make a difference.

**SMA:** Do you have any advice for nurses who want to become nursing educators?

**SC:** They must have a passion for education. If you really believe that is really what you want to do in life, then go for it. You must also know that

academics do. If you come here for money and status, you will be disappointed. You will find it difficult, because the work is ongoing, you have to perform constantly and be a role model to your students. If you want to be a successful academic, you'll have to devote your whole life to academics.

**SMA:** What other hobbies do you partake in outside of work?

**SC:** My husband and I like to travel to different parts of the world. A few years ago we visited Kenya. We went to Masai Mara National Park and watched wild animals run around the plain. That was one of our most memorable trips. We also visited Peru and followed an Inca trail up to Machu Picchu. It was unforgettable. When you are at Machu Picchu, at an altitude so high up in the mountains, you can feel the spirituality and understand why the Incas built their temple there. We've also been to North Cape in Norway, the northernmost point of Europe, to watch the midnight sun. In the summertime, the sun never sets. We love travelling because we enjoy learning about different cultures in



being an academic is very challenging. The job is never finished. It is not like working in a clinical setting, where if you are off duty, you are off duty. In academics, you are never off duty. You have to constantly prepare to teach, research, practice and also get involved in community service. You have to know how to manage your life and your time, so you can balance your work and personal life. It is challenging to be an academic. But if you have the passion to do it, and really want to do it, then do it. Passion is very important. If you do not enjoy teaching or research, don't come to an academic department, because that is what

various parts of the world and appreciate how wonderful and beautiful the world is. As there are so many things to see, to travel is to live.

In my younger days I used to play the piano and sing in church and school choirs, and perform in student concerts. But now I just don't have the time, so I listen to CDs. My favourite form of art is western opera. When I was a little girl I dreamt of being a soprano, but I did not have the talent. Maybe in the future after I retire.

**SMA:** Thank you Prof Chan. **SMA**



The Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies (ALCNS) was established in the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NUS, in 2005. This was a major milestone in the history of nursing in Singapore as ALCNS offers Singapore's first bachelor's degree in nursing. The programmes offered by ALCNS are: Bachelor of Science (Nursing), Bachelor of Science (Nursing) (Honours), Master of Nursing, Master of Science (Nursing) and Doctor of Philosophy. For more information, please see <http://medicine.nus.edu.sg/nursing/>