

By Dr Tan Wu Meng, Editorial Board Member

A House of Men and Women, a Home for Many Hearts

Photo Credit: Dr Wong Chiang Yin

It was with heavy hearts that my fellow medical officers (MOs) and I sat in the Houseman Canteen this evening (22 February 2008). Having made the effort to eat at every stall during its final days, we were now completing our last meal at the Canteen.

We were not alone in having made a pilgrimage to pay our respects before the Canteen closed. In fact, others had come from further afield than Singapore General Hospital (SGH), including those now at other restructured hospitals or in the private sector. Even former SGH CEO, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, had been spotted making a special trip to sample the *mee pok* one last time.

But last meals and final drinks have their endings. My cup of *Kopi-peng* was running dry, and the workers had come to bring tables and chairs away, amidst the dying light outside, and the dimming one by one of the overhead lamps within.

It felt like the end of an era. And indeed it was. Home to a half-century of meals, drinks, camaraderie and friendships old and new, the venerable Houseman's Canteen was closing.

I reached for my digital camera, then realised I had not brought it with me. Memory would have to suffice.

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I remember well the first affirmation of my decision to spend my houseman year in Singapore. It came when, after an afternoon of filing SMC registration paperwork, I sampled the chicken rice at the SGH Houseman Canteen. It was delicious, excellent

value for money, and – in the months to come – a useful source of comfort food after a particularly bad night on call.

Having not heard much about the Houseman Canteen during my time overseas, I nevertheless had opportunities aplenty to grow acquainted with the place. Initially, as a houseman tallying drink requests and collecting beverages on behalf of my seniors. And later, as a MO having drinks with colleagues and friends.

The natural order of things would then have each generation of MOs become registrars in their own time, and eventually – in years to come – as consultants footing the morning drinks' bill for the next generation of doctors.

But my generation of housemen and MOs will, sadly, never have the chance to sit as seniors in that selfsame Canteen.

And more so the loss for the current generation of finalists, for they will be the first batch of housemen not to know the Houseman we know.

Even though a new Canteen may be built, it will not be the same.

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But does it matter, beyond the ramblings of some sentimental doctors? It does, even if you are a counter of beans, or a consultant of management science.

The MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology in England is a research institute which has single-handedly won more than a dozen Nobel Prizes. Like the Outram Campus, it has a centralised canteen, with a culture that people are free to sit



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The Three Beauties of SGH:
A/Prof Agnes Tan, Dr Daphne Khoo and Mdm Tan Geok Eng, Medical Board, SGH



First to arrive: The Gang from CGH.
Dr Low Cheng Ooi, Chairman of Medical Board, CGH; A/Prof Tan Kok Chai, Chairman, Division of Surgery, Department of Plastic, Reconstructive & Aesthetic Surgery, SGH; Mr T K Udairam, CEO, CGH; Dr Wong Chiang Yin, COO, CGH and President, SMA.



Leaving her mark behind



The Three Pillars of SGH: Colon, Rectum and Anus.
Clinical A/Prof Eu Kong Weng, Head, Department of Colorectal Surgery, SGH and Prof Tan Ser Kiat, Group CEO, SingHealth and CEO, SGH.



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down with people they do not know, or to renew existing friendships.^[1, 2] Such a canteen promotes communication and collaboration, as people mix and network across departmental boundaries and generations.

A similar philosophy has guided the design of Google's catering facilities in the Googleplex in California, which is their corporate headquarters. They, too, have a central canteen where people of all ranks and departments are encouraged to mingle.^[3]

I do not think the juxtaposition of world-class excellence and a Canteen like the Houseman is simple coincidence. And I wonder if our profession in Singapore will be the poorer for its loss.

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Singapore is a young country. We have precious few buildings of historical significance and institutional memory. The Houseman Canteen is one of these rarities. It was old when many of our consultants were young. In its early days, when it opened in 1959, some of our Emeritus Professors would not even have graduated from medical school.

Successive generations of doctors have filled the Houseman Canteen with the memories and traditions of their day. The atmosphere permeates

the bricks and mortar of the building, binding its alumni across the decades.

As a student travelling overseas, I remember walking through the great Dining Hall of Trinity College. Built in 1604, one could feel the weight of history in it, and imagine the legends and personages of years gone by as they dined within, youthful and exuberant, before they grew into the gravitas of elder years and official portraits.

The Houseman Canteen, to me, was as great an institution, if not even greater, for Britain is an old country, and is expected to have many old things.

We are the poorer for the closure of this Canteen, although there is some scant consolation that so long as one of our generation of medics lives, there will be a corner of Singapore, somewhere in our hearts, that is forever the Houseman's. ■

References

1. **The Independent (UK). (13 October 2002) Inside the Nobel Prize factory.**
2. **de Chadarevian, S. (2002) Designs for Life: Molecular Biology after World War II.**
3. **Google (2008). Google Corporate Information: The Google Culture. Webpage accessed on 22 February 2008. <http://www.google.com/corporate/culture.html>**