

By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

Role Modelling – More Often Than We Realise

LESSONS IN LIFE AND MEDICINE FROM DR LIM KOK ANN

Perhaps age renders me somewhat nostalgic, but when medical students engage me in robust discussions about role models (or rather the lack thereof) in medicine today, I cannot help but recall the impact Professor Lim Kok Ann had as a medical role model to me and this, years before I even considered medicine as a career!

Many older readers will remember that Prof Lim, in addition to his distinguished career in academia, also had a second passion that consumed the later part of his life: chess. As a young upstart going for my first world tournament (the Under-16 World Youth Championship) in Timisoara, Romania, I was ‘too young’ to travel alone and Prof Lim kindly offered to be my second (something like a coach and helper with preparations for each game) and guardian, even travelling with me in the Economy class section of the plane. Three incidents stand out in this intense three-week tournament which looking back, profoundly influenced my views of the values a medical man should possess.

Despite his “star” status as a senior member of the international chess fraternity (He was assigned a driver, a staff officer and also put up in one of the finest rooms in the hotel) and the consequent numerous demands on his time, he would always politely insist that his first priority was my well-being and preparation for the next game. Hence, he would cut short dinners held in his honour and return with me to the hotel to prepare for the next day’s opponent.

I recall he was also provided with an honorarium by our Romanian hosts who insisted that he take it though he said repeatedly he had no need for it as all his needs were more than amply taken care of. The honorarium was equivalent to many months’ salary of an average worker and on one of our daily walks along the river he made a short detour to a nearby church and placed the entire sum of money into the offering box. No words were needed; I knew he felt there were greater needs than his own.

Finally, in my last game against the Pole (which was inconsequential in the medal standings as

I had earlier lost to the eventual Soviet winner) with me unable to press home a small advantage despite six hours of effort, the Pole repeatedly asked for a draw (Early draws after 10 to 15 moves in international chess tournaments were common practice in last rounds then, when the result had no impact on final medal standings). Even the Pole’s manager exasperatedly asked Prof Lim to tell me to agree to a draw so that we could all attend the closing ceremony. Prof Lim simply looked at the Singapore flag on the table and asked, “Are you here for yourself?”

“*Putting the needs of the patient first*”, “*Placing society before self*” and “*Doing One’s Best*” – All these identify the true professional – what a medical man should be and the Lim Kok Ann I knew.

Coming back to discussions with medical students today on the task of role models, I am struck by how large an imprint our behaviours outside the clinic or ward leave upon these young minds, and how blissfully oblivious we are of the moral decline we incite amongst our younger brethren by what we say and do outside patient encounters. Prof, exactly 20 years have past since you shared these lessons through your life’s examples. Thank you. ■



Dr Jeremy Lim is Director, Research and Education in the Singapore Health Services and leads the health services research programme for the cluster. This commentary is contributed in his personal capacity.



Professor Lim Kok Ann was Dean of Medicine in the then University of Singapore from 1965 to 1972. He achieved fame as the first to isolate the new strain of Asian influenza in 1957. Prof Lim was Singapore’s first chess champion in 1949 and was Secretary-General of the World Chess Federation from 1982 to 1988. The grandson of Dr Lim Boon Keng, he died in 2003 at the age of 83.