

By Dr William Yip Chin Ling



EULOGY FOR EMERITUS PROFESSOR WONG HOCK BOON

THE FOLLOWING EULOGY WAS READ BY DR WILLIAM YIP AT THE KAMPING KAPOR METHODIST CHURCH ON 30 DECEMBER 2008, TO REMEMBER AND TO HONOUR EMERITUS PROFESSOR WONG HOCK BOON FOR HIS SELFLESS DEDICATION AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO OUR NATION.

Mrs Wong, Julia, Tom, Rev. Kang Ho Soon, brothers and sisters-in-Christ, fellow colleagues, relatives and friends, we gather today at the thanksgiving memorial service to remember and honour Emeritus Professor Wong Hock Boon. My name is William Yip, one of Professor Wong's many students. I would like to walk you down memory lane to share with you my life experience with Professor Wong and his family. I believe my sharing today represents the feeling, thought, emotion and heart for this great, yet truly unassuming person, of my many friends, colleagues and contemporaries who got to know him, respect him and love him.

In my life I receive many blessings, of which one significant one is to be born in the era of Professor Wong Hock Boon. I was his undergraduate student in 1972, his houseman in 1974, and subsequently his trainee, lecturer, senior lecturer and associate professor in 1987. In the next 21 years, I continued to learn from him even after his retirement in 1988, and in the later years I watched over him and Mrs Wong, as expected of a student. To say

that Professor Wong had influenced me is an understatement and perhaps superficial. The humility of a great academic, the selfless dedication of a superb teacher and the power of knowledge from this simple man truly inspired and excited me. After 6 months of working as a houseman in his department, I switched from Internal Medicine to follow his footsteps to take up Paediatrics.

Professor Wong graduated from the then University of Malaya in Singapore in 1952, two years after I was born. He was offered the Founder Chair of Paediatrics in 1962 by the University of Singapore and was appointed Founder Director of the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies in 1965. He retired from the National University of Singapore in 1988. With the quiet and steadfast support of Mrs Wong, his entire professional life dedicated to teaching, research and patient care had benefitted generations of doctors and children. As his student and colleague, I witnessed in close encounter his devotion, enthusiasm, perseverance, humility and gentleness in imparting knowledge and mentoring his students and young doctors. I therefore consider

myself very much blessed that I walked a good part of my life together with him, in my formative years during my professional training and learning to be a patient-caring physician. As I walk you down memory lane, I treasure his teaching in the intellectually stimulating daily grand ward-round and in the weekly clinical conference during which the basics as well as advances of the science and art of paediatrics were imparted. As the Founder Director of the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies, he had the foresight to set up the annual Master of Medicine Course, during which he invited four to five eminent overseas experts to teach us, prior to the final Master of Medicine Examination. Although I soon realised that none of these experts' total quantum of knowledge could match up to his, this valuable teaching course gave me and my contemporaries early exposure to the best of medicine in the Western world and an opportunity to establish our network of subsequent subspecialty training. In many other ways he had taught me by example to be generous with my time in teaching students and young doctors and in devotion to patient care.

The great physician William Osler said, "The practice of medicine is a calling". Although this has become a catch phrase, few have understood the true meaning, let alone walk the talk, better than Professor Wong. His devotion to the daily grand ward-round with the whole department starting from 7.30am three hundred and sixty five days a year, to solving clinical problems for all patients, regardless of social class, to the weekly clinical conferences teaching the postgraduate students, and to the weekly professorial tutorials teaching the undergraduate students posted to the department, is legendary. Solving clinical problems for all patients was his self-imposed responsibility. Immediately after the round he would write down on a small piece of paper the difficult problems. The next moment he would be in the medical library checking in the *Index Medicus* to look up for the latest advances. All these monumental efforts of self learning and teaching of students culminated into 52 volumes of the Paediatric Clinical Conference Notes. All batches of Master of Medicine students and many overseas students from the surrounding countries prior to his retirement fed on this predigested staple diet to grow. I do not have time to share with you how these have helped me in my own medical education and my career development. Suffice it to say that I really felt something missing in me when the clinical

paediatric conferences and the daily grand rounds came to an end when Professor Wong retired in 1988. My other regret is that my children, Benjamin and Vivien do not have the privilege to be taught and mentored by this giant.

Today I have so far highlighted Professor Wong's devotion in teaching and patient-care. His achievement in research ran into hundreds of scientific papers published in international, local and regional medical journals, and included important landmark discoveries in haematology and genetics. His administrative duties, besides running the Department and the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies, included setting up many national and international steering committees. For all these achievements, he was awarded many national and international prestigious accolades.

Professor Wong was truly a person of few words, as all his energy was channeled to teaching, patient care, research and administration. Yet he was truly Mr Nice Guy. I had never seen him angry with any hospital staff or his doctors. He never belittled any of his staff, no matter how stupid we might be sometimes. The most junior doctor could ask him any question and he would answer. Those of us who lived in that era knew that not all bosses were so nice. Indeed feedback from current batches of junior doctors shows that such problem still exists, perhaps to a lesser degree.

Before his retirement, I was just like one of his many doctors. When he was my boss, I respected, or even revered him. My conversation with him lasted no more than one minute, yet his answer was always precise and helpful. After his retirement, I visited him more often, especially after his coronary bypass, when Julia was working in Boston, and in the past few years when he was unwell. Our conversation still did not last longer than 15 minutes. He knew that I and my family love him, and I also told him many times that many of his students love him, but did not have a chance to express it. I know he loved me, because in distress, he would also look for me, besides his immediate family members.

Professor Wong was truly a family man. His daily routine revolved around hospital, university and home. He was very blessed to have a totally devoted wife who looked after him with love and admiration. He trusted her completely and gave her all his possessions. Without Mrs Wong's continuous support, it would be difficult to predict Professor Wong's achievement. Professor Wong loved his only daughter, Julia, with all his heart, indeed in a way

only fathers with only one daughter will know how deep this love is. Julia has done her parents proud in her own achievement working previously in Singapore and in Boston as a paediatrician and now devoting much time in doing missionary work to help the poor people of the surrounding countries, very much after the heart of her mother. In the last few years when Professor Wong was unwell, Julia and her husband Tom, together with Mrs Wong, took care of Professor Wong's needs with total devotion and love.

Professor Wong's life touched not only his students and colleagues, but also his neighbours and common folks who sought his help. Professor and Mrs Wong are good Samaritans par excellence. Their friends and neighbours, especially Madeleine, Francis and James and their children, became a closely knit extended family. Their mutual love and support in the past two decades is a living example of brotherly love and God's love on earth.

My father, two years younger than Professor Wong, passed away on 24th January last year. Mrs Wong, Julia and Tom came to comfort me and my family.

With the passing of Professor Wong Hock Boon on 28th December 2008, Singapore has lost a truly great son. We grieve and are saddened. Yet by the grace of God, and in His good timing, Professor Wong accepted Jesus as his personal saviour four years ago. God's own faithfulness strengthens the faith of the many who have been praying for him. In his remaining years, Professor Wong diligently studied the Bible with Mrs Wong, reciting the Lord's Prayer and singing hymns, truly a picture of foretaste of the heavenly life on earth. In his youthful days, Professor Wong took up medical practice as a calling. His response to this "calling" has set the legendary standard of the highest order. He knew his "Caller" and now he is with Him. The two old friends, my father and Professor Wong, an equally important fatherly figure to me, are now in eternal rest with peace and joy in the arms of our Lord.

May God comfort and continue to bless, guide, protect and strengthen the spiritual and physical health of Mrs Wong, Julia, Tom, their loved ones and all present today. May God bless the hands of those who continue to do good work, following the example of Professor Wong Hock Boon, to glorify God. Thank you. ■