

Dr Oon Chiew Seng was born in Penang in 1916. She spent two years in nursing before sitting for the Senior Cambridge certificate in 1940. Midway through her medical studies in the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore, World War II broke out and she was evacuated to India where she continued her studies.

Upon returning to Singapore in 1946, she successfully completed her studies and obtained her Licentiate of Medical Science in 1948. Thereafter, Dr Oon was posted to Kandang Kerbau Hospital (KKH) and offered the Queen's Scholarship to study in England. She returned to KKH in 1956 as a registrar, and left for private practice in 1959.

Dr Oon has also been passionate about serving the community. She was Chairman of the Building Fund and Member of the Medical Committee of the Sree Narayanan Mission Home for the Aged Sick from 1984 to 2000. In 1993, Dr Oon liaised with the Ministry of Health to build the first nursing home for dementia residents. Fundraising for the nursing home began in 1995 and the Apex Harmony Lodge began operating in 1999. To date, Dr Oon is Chairman of the Management Committee and oversees its operation.

Dr Oon has been recipient of numerous accolades for her work. In 1984, she was conferred Honorary Fellow by the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and in 1989, Honorary Fellow by the Asia Oceania Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. She was also conferred Honorary Member by the Singapore Medical Association in 2005, and Honorary Fellowship by the Academy of Medicine, Singapore in 2007.



Interview with By Dr Toh Han Chong DR OON CHIEW SENG

93-year-old Dr Oon Chiew Seng shares her perseverance to succeed and passion for community

Dr Toh Han Chong: How did your career in Medicine start?

Dr Oon Chiew Seng: All my friends joined teaching, but I dislike teaching. I was the first amongst my peers to enter nursing in 1937. I come from a family of ten, with six brothers. I am the youngest in the family.

It was generally felt that the teaching profession did not lead to personal career progress due to a limited career path then. My brother had studied electrical and chemical engineering and when he returned from his studies, he insisted that I leave nursing for medicine. In those days, to enter medicine, one had to take Latin as a subject as well, and my brother pestered me incessantly until I agreed. However, it was on condition that I would not resign from nursing as I would feel too ashamed to return should I have failed to enter medical school. I had just

joined nursing for one or two years and because of this, I proposed that I would join Medicine if my matron would grant me no-pay leave. Surprisingly, the matron agreed.

I left for Bombay after the war broke out, and met Robert Loh's mother in December 1941. She introduced me to Rev. Dr John Wilson, who was the head of Wilson College in Bombay, and he let me join the college. I graduated with second upper class honours and looked for the cheapest university I could find – Lady Harding Medical College. Food and lodging were provided, so I left Bombay for Delhi.

THC: What was your experience of studying medicine in the midst of a war?

OCS: In June 1940, I was admitted to the Medical College of Singapore – one would not go too far to study in those

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days. The war broke out in December, and many of my friends returned to Malaysia. I remained in Singapore with my brothers.

One day in January 1941, my brother drove his family and myself down to the pier. He made all of us board the *Felix Roussel* to Bombay, and there must have been approximately a thousand passengers on the ship. It took us about two weeks to reach Bombay, and we rented a flat to be shared with several families. There were 16 children in total!

As we were very poor at that time, it was suggested that I approach the Malaysian High Commission to borrow money so as to enter college. Studying in Wilson College was probably the toughest time in my life. With 16 children, it was difficult for me to study. Luckily, our flat had a rooftop and I used to study there with a kerosene lamp. We were staying near the coast, so I would wake up soaked if I fell asleep while studying.

The Chinese believe that one will develop aches and pains if one falls asleep in damp conditions. I can tell you now that is not my experience.

THC: When did you return to Singapore?

OCS: I returned in June 1946 despite my brother's objections as he thought the college in Singapore had not reopened. Luckily the college reopened on 1 June 1946 and I arrived on 2 June 1946. India at that time was fighting for its independence, and schools were shut down whenever fights or riots broke out.

I went to the Malaysian High Commission and requested to be sent back to Singapore, and they did so within a week. I was very lucky, as I arrived back in Singapore a day after the Medical College reopened. I did my posting and graduated in 1948 with a Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (LMS). This was before the university college became a university.

THC: Were there many women in medicine in the 1940s?

OCS: There were quite a number back then. EtonHouse International Pre-School at Orchard Boulevard used to be a women's hostel before and after the war, housing women who attended the Medical College. I knew Dr Mahathir when he was dating his then-girlfriend and now wife, Hasma, while she was staying at the hostel. Even after I graduated in 1948, the principal agreed to let me stay there until 1950 when they shifted.



Dr Oon Chiew Seng receives the SMA Honorary Membership award from Health Minister Mr Khaw Boon Wan.

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THC: What made you decide to do Obstetrics and Gynaecology?

OCS: To be honest, my brother forced me to do it. Professor Meckie was very fond of me because I was hardworking. I was sent to Kandang Kerbau Hospital (KKH) for my posting.

THC: What was your posting in KKH like?

OCS: I started out as a houseman there, and the Director of Medical Services later offered me the Queen's Scholarship so I left for England in 1953 and stayed in London.

In Singapore, there is much studying but overseas, the clinical experience is better. I even had time to play *mahjong* in London everyday with my friends! Later on, I did my posting in Liverpool, and then in Manchester. However, there was much more hands-on experience in Singapore, as GPs were allowed to deliver babies in their clinics and all their complications were sent to KKH. One day, I had to do ten caesarean sections, and majority of them were emergency caesarean sections. I helped the younger doctors, many of whom were very inexperienced.

THC: Did you return to KKH after your stint in England?

OCS: I returned to KKH in 1956. As a registrar, I was often made to do all the work as well as teach medical students.

THC: Was that when you left for private practice?

OCS: I left in May 1959, and my office was at Armenian Street. The clinic was opened by Dr William Heng; this was before Gleneagles Hospital had been built.

As I wanted to continue what I did at KKH, I brought in an operating table and various equipments. I also had to bring in an anaesthetist from the army who was of British nationality. It was a harrowing time, as I would have to stand

by my patients after the anaesthetist left, because he was so used to Caucasians. I was worried that my patients would have been overdosed, as Asians are slighter in stature. It was not easy, but I had to carry on. In the end, the British left after PAP won the general elections.

THC: Would you say that you had an assertive personality?

OCS: I had to fight the system a lot but I had no fear. What's the worst that can be done? I had the energy to do the things I wanted, and I was the first specialist in obstetrics and gynaecology to enter the private sector. I would practice at my office, and work at Gleneagles Hospital when requested to.

The work that I have accomplished has been very satisfying. I have no regrets being a doctor; although patients who think only of themselves can be quite troublesome.

THC: Can you share with us some memorable moments in your career?

OCS: When I first went to KKH, there was an occasion when I wished the floor would open and swallow me. I had been there for only a week and was put on night call, and was left all alone. Nobody would come even if I called for help. I remember there was a woman who kept bleeding after manual removal of the placenta and I did not know what to do. I kept calling for help but no one responded – I had to watch that woman die. It was the worst moment in my life.

How much could I have learnt after a week's posting? Even if I wanted to carry out an emergency operation, I would not have known how to. In those days, nobody really wanted to teach you anything. You had to fight for knowledge.

I am also very fond of telling this story: One of my patients presented with a straightforward delivery, but started bleeding without clotting. I did everything I could, and even removed her uterus but her bleeding did not stop.

Later, I discovered that her husband was the head of the Malaysian Royal Navy. The navy was located in Woodlands at that point in time, so I instructed him to go back and get 40 people to donate blood. I managed to give the patient 27 units of fresh blood and she recovered. If there was no blood available, she would have bled to death. I worked for 48 hours without resting, and it was the most significant case I have had.

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Back in those days, we did not know what the cause was; we did not have many blood profiles. Instead, we just worked with clinical judgment.

THC: What is your opinion on the shortage of babies in Singapore now, as compared to the baby boom in the 60s?

OCS: The shortage at present is due to the then "Two is Enough" policy, as there were fears that parents would not be able to put their third child through school. I remember an incident when I met a wealthy Teochew family with two daughters. The mother was very upset by

the policy enforced so I told the family not to be afraid, and that they should go ahead to try for a boy. The parents were troubled and I advised them to pray so as to ease their fears.

At present, they have another two sons. Wealthy people tend to be fearful of policy changes so I had to reassure them. What's the worst that could happen?

THC: It must have been very interesting to see the changes in obstetrics and gynaecology through the years.

OCS: Actually, I was not able to witness first hand most of the changes as I left the public sector very early on. However, there are many people in private practice for O&G now. I retired from full-time clinical work in 1991 and decided to focus on building a home in 1991.

It has been a rewarding journey to have brought so many babies into the world. One day I came out of the Metropolitan in New York and there was a lady who called my name and waved at me. I did not recognise her, but she identified herself as Mrs Tan. She recounted that her first baby was presenting by the breech; it was a large breech sitting at the pelvic brim although she has a normal-sized pelvis. I asked her to let me do a caesarean delivery and if future babies presented by the head I would deliver them vaginally. I delivered her next two babies vaginally. I have only one such case.

People on the street sometimes come up and thank me; one man approached me and told me that I had delivered all his children, and they were now all directors in America. I have no regrets being a doctor.

THC: You initiated the first nursing home, Apex Harmony Lodge, for dementia patients; what made you go down this route?

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OCS: Dr Kwa Soon Bee used to be my houseman, and he was Director of Medical Services when I went to see him. I told him that I wanted to build a home for the aged sick. Before I retired, I was already helping out in the Sree Narayana Mission Home for the Aged Sick. Instead, he brought up the need to have a dementia home, which was why I took on this project.

I learnt about dementia home care from the Australian system, I made several trips to Australia and maintain that they are the best in this field as they are very progressive.

I managed to get government funding of about \$2 million a year – it would have been very difficult without funding as our residents are mostly poor. We have about 210 beds, and approximately 10% of our residents pay market rate. The others pay subsidised rates. The home cost about a quarter of a million to design, and it took much effort to convince local architects of my vision, instead of just a concrete building.

Our management team and staff are very good, so much so that local and overseas visitors to Apex Harmony Lodge are impressed by the facilities and care.

THC: You have been through some difficult times; I'm sure our readers would like to know your secret for longevity.

OCS: There is no secret; I am blessed with good genes. My grandparents passed away in their 80s and 90s. My father passed away in his 70s. This was in the old days when life expectancy was quite low.

I used to exercise regularly – I used to drive to the Botanical Gardens for long walks. However, when I got to my 90s, my friends and relatives repeatedly advised me to stop driving, until I myself became concerned and stopped driving at 91.



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I think it is important to keep busy and maintain one's independence.

THC: What else do you do for recreation?

OCS: I read a lot, especially detective stories by Agatha Christie; I have probably read every book written by her. Back when I was practicing, there was not much to do whenever a patient was in labour so I would sit in the day room on standby with my book. I still have those books today.

I used to travel a lot, as I wanted to make up for the time spent at work. In the 1980s I made up my mind to travel, and have practically seen the whole world. I visited most of South America and went to Machu Picchu and

subsequently took a cruise by Crystal Line to Lima. We also went down the west coast and on to the east coast. That was after I retired; I was in my 70s then but had no problem trekking. Going uphill was fine; I was a little worried on the way down for fear of falling.

Being Chinese, I also used to visit China yearly with Jack Ho, a radiologist. Through our journeys, we came to know a Professor of Foreign Languages, and this Professor used to take us everywhere with his wife. We would pay for their travel expenses and they would be our guide. We travelled this way for many years until the early 90s.

THC: Thank you for your insights and forthright answers. **SMA**