

SMA NEWS



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Prof Tan Cheng Lim is a well-respected pioneer in the field of Paediatrics, having headed the largest Paediatric Department in Singapore for over two decades. Appointed as Head of the Government Department of Paediatrics at Singapore General Hospital, he transformed it to be the foundation for a Children's Hospital when KK Women's and Children's Hospital opened in 1997. Prof Tan was appointed Chairman of the Division of Medicine from 1999 to 2002, and has been Emeritus Consultant and Associate Dean since 2004. In addition, he is also a tireless mentor, serving as Clinical Professor at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, and has trained generations of medical students and paediatricians. Prof Tan has served on numerous committees, including as Chairman of the Expert Committee on Immunisation, President of the Singapore Paediatric Society, and Chairman of the Chapter of Paediatricians. His accolades are many, including the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 1984 and Ruth Wong Award in 1987. For his selfless service in public healthcare, he was conferred the Healthcare Humanity Award in 2004. For his meritorious service to the medical profession, the Singapore Medical Association conferred upon him Honorary Membership in May 2010. SMA News is indeed honoured to be able to ask Prof Tan some questions on his career thus far.

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INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR TAN CHENG LIM

SMA News - SMA: What made you decide to do Paediatrics and if you had a chance to do it all over again, would you choose Paediatrics as a specialty?

PROF TAN CHENG LIM - TCL: I have always felt that the job of being a doctor gives us two main advantages over an ordinary desk job – it's never boring, it's challenging and one is not desk-bound, and at the same time one is doing good by serving humanity while at work.

Surgery was out for me as I did not have the manual dexterity or courage for it. So my option was for Medicine and as it happened, my first posting as a Medical Officer was in Paediatrics and the friendly environment together with the joy of nurturing children back to health was a clear sign of where my option lay.

On looking back, I certainly have no regrets. The warm camaraderie I have enjoyed with my fellow Paediatricians throughout my working life is an added bonus.

SMA: As a Paediatrician, what are some of the trends you have noticed over the years

gastrointestinal tract were our main concern. They could be severe, resulting in pneumonia ± empyema, meningitis and severe gastroenteritis with dehydration. Even miliary tuberculosis was seen, as were the viral exanthems like measles, chickenpox and rubella. These have largely dropped in significance with our comprehensive immunisation programme.

While bacterial and viral infections still make up a significant part of our patient population, other diseases have come into prominence such as childhood obesity and diabetes, autoimmune diseases and cancers as well as children with psychosocial problems.

Paediatric cancers have always been a challenge to Paediatricians. Paediatric oncologists have the advantage over their adult counterparts in the management of such cases as our overall cure rate is significantly better and continues to improve with modern-day chemotherapy.

SMA: Even as a great mentor to generations of Paediatricians, who are your own mentors in the field of Paediatrics?

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in children both from a health and a social perspective?

TCL: The change in the pattern of diseases in children in Singapore through the years is a well-known fact. As a young doctor, infections mainly of the respiratory system and

TCL: As I said earlier, my decision in what to specialise was made during my posting as a Medical Officer in Paediatrics. My Department Head was the late Dr Tan Kwang Hoh and I am truly indebted to him for planting the seeds for my decision to do Paediatrics with his interesting teaching, constant encouragement and timely

advice. My other mentor whom I am really thankful for is Dr Chan Sing Kit who succeeded Dr Tan Kwang Hoh as Department Head. Her deep commitment to her work and caring nature was something to treasure and I had the good fortune to continue working under her for some years after getting my higher degree.

SMA: Can you recount to us some of your fondest and deepest memories as a Paediatrician?

TCL: My fondest and deepest memories as a Paediatrician have a lot to do with some of my earlier Haematology/Oncology patients who continue to send me Christmas cards year after year. I feel grateful to receive nice meaningful notes from them to say they are well and working. Some of them have also gotten married. The cards come from Singapore, London and New York. A few also surprise me with e-mail messages.

SMA: What is one experience that has shaped your life?

TCL: In 1969 I was awarded a Colombo Plan Scholarship to Australia, having passed my Australian Membership Part I (theory) in Singapore. The Scholarship was given to attempt the second part of the exams i.e. the clinical section in Paediatrics. I was posted to the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne to prepare myself for the exams, which were due four months into my posting.

I was fortunate to meet Dr John Colebatch, the Head of Department of Haematology/Oncology during one of the clinical teaching sessions conducted by him and he very kindly offered to take me on as an honorary Haematology/Oncology Fellow in his Department should I pass the Membership exam. The end result was that I officially worked as a Fellow under him for the remaining six months of my scholarship and consolidated my interest in sub-specialising in that field.

Dr Colebatch was highly respected as a Paediatric Haematologist/Oncologist and was a very kind person. We remained in regular contact for many years upon my return to Singapore.

SMA: What is one experience that you wish to forget?

TCL: I have been scratching my head to think of the most impatient or difficult patient I have had to deal with in my career but cannot remember any memorable one!

SMA: You were involved in the work of Singapore Children's Society, what are your views on what roles VWOs can play in children's health?

All doctors are basically expected to have sufficient knowledge, wisdom, compassion and skills in the management of their patients. I would say a great doctor possesses true compassion and empathy, professionalism, is approachable and fully knowledgeable with inner confidence in himself and yet showing humility. He also truly appreciates the help of his fellow healthcare workers – fellow colleagues and nurses alike.

TCL: I have been involved with the Singapore Children's Society (SCS) for more than 30 years.

VWOs can play very important roles in the area of children's health and welfare, and the SCS is an outstanding example, having been led by deeply committed Chairmen and committees throughout the years. This has resulted in the SCS being a shining example of a VWO showing true dedication and commitment in the area of children's health and welfare. Their Convalescent Home beside the beach at Changi in the sixties was an ideal site to house debilitated children recovering from malnutrition and chronic diseases like malaria and tuberculosis. SCS moved with

the times with the closing of the Convalescent Home and the current running of Sunbeam Place in Bishan which is a welfare home to victims of child abuse, neglect and broken homes among other present-day problems.

Fortunately Singaporeans are very forthcoming and generous in donating to VWOs involved in the care of children, and the SCS's proven track record is a real boost in this respect.

SMA: The World Health Organisation has stated that there is no health without mental health. Can you comment on the many challenges on the emotional life of the family and how that has impacted on children's health?

TCL: As a relatively small and young nation, we have certainly made remarkable progress in many ways, including health matters. With success, we invariably begin to see the many challenges emerging in the emotional life of families disadvantaged in various ways – financial or otherwise. Inadequate parental skills causing emotional problems in families can be aggravated by various factors. For example the belief of many parents that their children need private tuition to augment what they have learnt in school may unnecessarily stress them, while paradoxically, the less well-off are unable to afford tuition for deserving slow learners.

Parents need to learn how to build up self-esteem in their school-going children to cope with their studies. Unfortunately the obsession of the average Singaporean family to ensure their children come out tops in their cohort is probably the main reason why we are seeing more children with psychosocial problems, and we find we need the input of the Child Psychiatrist or Psychologist for joint management when these problems are complex and longstanding.

The increasing divorce rates affecting all three major races in Singapore, which probably has a strong link to the increasing number of child abuse and neglect cases we are handling in hospitals is further evidence of our shortcomings in family bonding.



▲ Mrs Tan Cheng Lim, Prof Tan Cheng Lim, Prof Woo Keng Thye and Dr Chong Yeh Woei at SMA Annual Dinner 2010

and would enjoy any tasty meal, be it local or western. Left to my own devices, I would favour a simple western meal provided it is nicely fried or grilled, such as a juicy beef steak, pork, chicken chop or even fish and chips fried with a nice batter. My wife does not quite approve of the fried part and will often remind me that I am a doctor!

SMA: What are your hobbies, and what is your view on soccer programmes on television?

TCL: I used to participate in athletics in primary and secondary school before switching to social tennis and squash. Unfortunately I had to stop all these sporting activities completely in 1990 when I suffered a retinal detachment

after accidentally banging my head on the wall while playing a game of squash. I am eternally grateful to Dr Victor Yong who was Head of Department of Ophthalmology in SGH then. He diagnosed it and successfully operated on me the very day I consulted him about it.

Since then I mainly enjoy easy listening music or watch sports on TV. I must confess that I used to be an avid wrestling fan with the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) series being my favourite programme, but stopped years ago when I felt that too many of their fights were staged. Championship (Grand Slam) tennis and EPL soccer are now my favourite programmes, and I have been a Manchester United fan for years.

I used to enjoy both tennis and soccer programmes on Starhub cable. It is somewhat irritating that I have to subscribe to SingTel as well because EPL soccer is now only available on this line, and its drawback is that it takes a couple of minutes for the programme to come on – by which time I may have missed the thrill of witnessing a goal scored live!

SMA: Thank you for the great interview, Prof Tan. **SMA**

SMA: What are some of the exciting frontiers of Paediatrics?

TCL: The technological advances in the field of medicine have revolutionised the practice of medicine especially in invasive procedures. For example, Paediatric Cardiologists can go into areas that previously needed the intervention of the Paediatric Cardiac Surgeon (for example, the closure of PDA, VSD, ASD and other more complex problems). New diagnostic imaging tools and interventional radiology have also benefitted our paediatric patients. Similarly the field of genetics and genetic engineering promises us an exciting future in the prevention and management of genetic diseases, which includes the field of oncology, and is of special interest to me.

SMA: Why is medical research important to the healthcare landscape of Singapore?

TCL: This is a natural progression to what we have achieved in the delivery of healthcare to our fellow citizens.

In the sixties we were ranked by WHO to be somewhere in the middle in comparison with other countries on the standard of delivery of healthcare, as measured by infant mortality rate, for example. Today we are right at the top and among the top three countries in the

world in this respect. We need to conduct medical research on our own population and we have the resources and ready finance to do so, to keep up the good work.

SMA: What qualities make a great doctor?

TCL: All doctors are basically expected to have sufficient knowledge, wisdom, compassion and skills in the management of their patients. I would say a great doctor possesses true compassion and empathy, professionalism, is approachable and fully knowledgeable with inner confidence in himself and yet showing humility. He also truly appreciates the help of his fellow healthcare workers – fellow colleagues and nurses alike.

SMA: Which five books would you bring to a desert island, air-con study room provided of course?

TCL: May I confess that I would prefer to bring my five favourite CDs – mainly oldies, switch off the air-con, lie on the beach and enjoy the scenery and music at the same time!

SMA: What would constitute a great meal for you?

TCL: I am no great connoisseur of good food