

Citation of Professor John Wong

By A/Prof Lim Yean Teng

We are here to add what we can to life,
not to get what we can from life.

- William Osler

Dr Chong Yeh Woei, President, Singapore Medical Association; A/Prof Chin Jing Jih, Organising Chairman, Singapore Medical Association Lecture 2010, distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues and friends:

In his invitation for me to read the citation for the SMA Lecturer of the prestigious Singapore Medical Association Lecture 2010, A/Prof Chin stated, and I quote, "The SMA Lectureship is awarded in the main to eminent and distinguished persons who have made significant contributions to Medicine and the community."

The SMA Lecturer 2010 is none other than Professor John Wong Eu Li, Deputy Chief Executive, National University Health System and Dean, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore. Of course,

these are just two of the many hats this outstanding individual wears. If I were to read his entire curriculum vitae, I would take up all the time allocated for both this citation and the SMA Lecture!

Prof Wong was born in the year 1957. He is married to his childhood sweetheart, Jen Kwong Hui, and they have two lovely children, Alexandra and Christopher. He graduated from the Faculty of Medicine, National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1981. Incidentally, he is among the first cohort of medical graduates from NUS, and belonged to a small group of local medical students who technically went through two universities to obtain a medical degree – he was enrolled in the University of Singapore, but graduated with a MBBS degree from NUS. Like all good and able Singapore sons, he served in the Singapore Armed Forces after housemanship.

He received a
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Commendation for his stellar performance as Formation Medical Officer at the School of Basic Military Training, and with that, a six-month clinical posting in a department and hospital of his choice towards the end of full-time national service. He chose to do Internal Medicine at Medical Unit II, a University Unit then at the Singapore General Hospital. It was there that I first met Prof Wong. What was my impression of him from initial encounters? As he was an army medical officer then, perhaps it is only appropriate that I borrow a military term, and that is "super on". MU II was my second posting. During what I call the "good old days" or what some would call "bad old days" now, house officers took on a lot more in running the wards than the current house staff or first year residents. Comparing medical clerkship with the previous surgical posting, I found it tough. I considered it my good fortune to have him as my mentor, and benefited much from his guidance. He made me appear good in front of my registrars and consultants – for he would recheck the history I obtained for every patient, examine them again, formulate the diagnosis, and include the differentials. He would also review each of my orders, delete unnecessary ones, and add appropriate investigations that I had missed. Of course, he would then follow up and make sure that I implemented the orders and traced all results on time, before I was allowed to leave for the day!

In 1985, Prof Wong had the foresight to leave for the United States to take up Internal Medicine residency at the Department of Medicine in both the New York Hospital – Cornell Medical Center, and the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. After three years, he obtained Board Certification in Internal Medicine. He continued with training at the same institutions, and became Board

A/Prof Lim Yean Teng and
Dr Chong Yeh Woei



Certified in both Haematology and Medical Oncology after his fellowship. As of today, Prof Wong remains one of the handfuls of local medical graduates with Internal Medicine and subspecialty ABIM certification. He is one of the only two local graduates whom I know to have served as Chief Resident in a prestigious American Academic Medical Center's Internal Medicine programme.

In 1992, he returned to serve our motherland, and the rest, as they say, is history. He has excelled in every field that he has involved himself in, and either attained leadership roles, or was honoured. Since the SMA Lectureship is awarded to "eminent and distinguished persons who have made significant contributions to Medicine and the community", it is only fit that I devote the rest of this citation to show why Prof John Wong deserves to deliver the SMA Lecture.

On the education front, Prof John Wong joined the University in 1992 as a Senior Lecturer, and attained full Professorship in a mere eight years. He has been Dean, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, since 2003, and has made important contributions to medical education in Singapore.

In the interest of time, I shall just name two, the first being: reviewing and making extensive curriculum changes to medical education in the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine; so that NUS medical graduates are aligned with today's societal needs. Secondly: the creation of the track system for academic staff in the faculty. In the past, every academic staff in the School of Medicine would be assessed yearly on their performance as clinicians, teachers and in research. With the new track system, staff can choose to concentrate on becoming a Clinician-Educator, Clinician-Scientist, or Clinician-Administrator. As a result, the academic staff is clear of what is expected of them, and can

contribute in areas that they are passionate in. The new track system helps to retain existing staff members, and recruit new blood. For his many efforts, Prof Wong was awarded the Public Administration Medal (Silver) during the National Day Awards in 2005.

One particular aspect of Prof Wong's Deanship I wish to highlight is that students do not view him as someone unapproachable who just sits in the Dean's Office. He interacts regularly with medical students and supports many of their activities. He forges ties with and among students of different years, and strengthens their bond with the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. The end result is undoubtedly desirable, and the full benefits will be clearly seen in years to come.

As a clinician, Prof Wong is highly regarded both as a physician and oncologist. It is a known fact that he serves as a personal physician to many of our country's "famous", and not to mention, "very important" people. As the list might be a classified state secret, I have no intention of starting a Singapore version of WikiLeaks this afternoon, and run afoul of the law. In recognition of him being a "Master Clinician", to borrow an NUHS terminology, the Ministry of Health conferred upon Prof Wong the "National Outstanding Clinician Award" in the National Medical Excellence Awards 2009.

Moving on to the research front, Prof Wong was the inaugural head of the Department of Haematology and Oncology at the National University Hospital. Not only did he assemble a high calibre team of medical oncologists and haematologists, he recruited many outstanding researchers and made the department a regionally and internationally renowned research unit. The department evolved and was made a "National Centre" by the Ministry of Health in February 2010, and was renamed

National University Cancer Institute, Singapore. Prof Wong serves as Director of the Institute, and also Director of the Cancer Therapeutics Research Group. While we are still on the subject of research, I have to mention his steering role in the life science initiatives in Singapore during its formative years. He served as Vice President, Research and Life Sciences (2002-08), Director, Office of Life Sciences (2001-06) and Chairman, Board of the NUS Graduates School of Integrative Sciences and Engineering (2001-08). In recognition of his effort, Prof Wong is the first Singaporean, and the first from a Pacific or Asian country to be awarded the prestigious SASS Foundation award in 2010. The award was conferred and I quote, "in recognition of his outstanding contributions in advancing the field of Haematology Oncology" and "his dedication, excellence, and insight in his work against lymphoma and related diseases".

As an administrator and clinician leader, the list of Prof Wong's appointments and achievements is too long to fit into this ten-minute citation. As today's event is held at the spanking new NUHS Tower Block Auditorium, it is only appropriate that I share with you his role in creating the National University Health System, or NUHS – the union of an academic medical centre and the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NUS. Prior to NUHS, the National University Hospital and the School of Medicine were two separate entities, each with its own Board, and if I may put it, goals. As someone with first-hand experience, I would say that the arrangement was not conducive for the development of academic medicine. Prof Wong had a vision, and was the mastermind behind NUHS. He drafted the initiative, and made changes in subsequent versions of the paper, and garnered support from the Ministry of



A/Prof Chin Jing Jih, A/Prof Lim Yean Teng, Prof John Wong and Dr Chong Yeh Woei



Prof John Wong delivering the SMA Lecture 2010

Health, Ministry of Education and politicians to bring it to fruition. Despite many obstacles, he had the tenacity to persevere and see the project through. The brand new auditorium and building that we are in, and other buildings around NUH which are just, or will soon be completed, are the results of his labour. He is also effective in getting donations and funds for the NUHS project. Current and future generations of medical students, as well as staff of NUHS have him to thank for the wonderful set up and environment in which they work and learn.

Last but not least, Prof Wong's contribution to both the medical community and community at large: while he serves both the medical community and public in many ways, due to time constraint, I can only highlight one of Prof Wong's numerous contributions here. On 12 January this year, it was announced that Stages 4 and 5 of the Circle Line would be fully operational by the fourth quarter of 2011. Station CC24 along Circle Line is the Kent Ridge MRT Station. While there is already an existing Buona Vista MRT Station to serve scientists working in Biopolis, Prof Wong envisaged that a new station in the NUS compound, preferably sited near NUH, would encourage interaction between scientists and hospital-based academic clinicians. He considers this vital for the development of life sciences and translational medicine in NUHS. While others were also involved, Prof Wong was instrumental in floating the idea to the relevant authorities, and soon we will see the outcome of his vision. Not only will Kent Ridge MRT Station serve its original intended purpose, current and future students of medical, dental and nursing schools, other students in NUS, staff working in NUHS and NUS, patients and visitors to NUH, and others visiting the Kent Ridge campus will benefit from



Prof Lim Pin and Prof John Wong

the convenient and affordable mode of public transportation.

In the 1997 SMA Lecture, the late Dr Wong Heck Sing, Prof John Wong's father and an Honorary Member of the Singapore Medical Association, spoke on the need to inspire a whole generation of new doctors through their role models. Is it a coincidence that the title for this afternoon's SMA Lecture is "Revisiting Role Models in Medicine"? Or is it because in this era where healthcare is viewed as a service industry, doctoring is to serve "clients" rather than "patients", that both the late Dr Wong and Prof Wong felt the need to touch on this issue of role models in medicine, to produce, and I quote from the concluding sentence of the 1997 SMA Lecture, "more caring, more ethical and more competent doctors?"

I am not privy to Prof Wong's lecture content, and am not sure of the past or present luminaries in our medical fraternity whom he will be highlighting this afternoon. A role model is defined by Collins' Dictionary as "a person regarded by others, especially younger people, as a good example to follow". Oxford Dictionaries Online defines a role model as "a

person looked to by others as an example to be imitated". After what I have presented, it would be impossible for any future lecturers on this subject not to include Prof John Wong's name among those mentioned.

Distinguished guests and esteemed colleagues, it leaves me then to invite you to put your hands warmly together, and invite Prof John Wong Eu Li – a clinician, educator, researcher, and administrator par excellence, on stage to deliver the SMA Lecture for 2010.

SMA



Back row (L-R): A/Prof Tan Kok Chai, Prof Ho Lai Yun, Dr Wong Chiang Yin and Prof Wong Tien Yin
 Front row (L-R): Dr Chong Yeh Woei, Prof Lim Pin, Prof John Wong, Dr Chew Chin Hin, A/Prof Chin Jing Jih, A/Prof Yeoh Khay Guan and Dr Sandy Cook