

In Memory of Dr John A Tambyah (1938-2011)

By Dr Gwee Hak Meng

John was an endocrinologist who taught generations of medical students in Singapore, and one of the first Editors of SMA News, serving in the early 1980s. He passed away peacefully on 5 April 2011. This eulogy was originally delivered by Dr Gwee at a thanksgiving service at John's home on 6 April. Many thanks to A/Prof Paul Ananth Tambyah, who edited this eulogy, and all those who contributed to it.

John, Teoh Pek Chuan, Tong G On, Ho Kok Tong and I belong to a special organisation known as NATO (No Action, Talk Only). We thank John for all the camaraderie, fellowship, pearls of wisdom and guidance he gave us over the years. My good friend, PC Teoh, gave John the greatest compliment when he described John as the only WISE physician we know. John towers over many medical luminaries by the example he set. His care for patients is legendary. When he stopped practice suddenly in December 2010 because of advanced disease, his primary concern was for his patients. I was amazed that he had retained his nursing staff so that they could photocopy a set of clinical notes for each patient. When each patient arrived at his clinic, they were given a choice of endocrinologists and a complete set of notes at no charge. That is medical practice at its best. I had the privilege of taking on some of his patients. Everyone had nothing but praise for him. The poor recounted how John would send them to the outpatient department for medication and review them periodically at minimum cost. His integrity, transparency and excellent standard of care meant that there were big boots I had to step into when I took over their care.

John the teacher. Teaching was in John's blood. For years, he was at the forefront of medical education, as censor and then scribe of the Academy of Medicine, chairman of the Chapter of Physicians, among other roles. He also organised the first advanced course in endocrinology, numerous local and international conferences and he spearheaded the first National Diabetes Commission, which published the first ever national clinical guidelines on the management of diabetes. Even in his illness, he taught the nursing staff who looked after him, pointing them to websites on his condition and treatments, and helping one to enter a diploma programme. In March 2011, Prof Chee Yam Cheng wrote to John: "We cannot forget the days when you helped us out at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) when endocrinology was starting here. Now it is a full-fledged department, and Dr Loh Keh Chuan is currently a very successful doctor at Mount Elizabeth Hospital."

John the motivator. As an active medical student, he helped start Rag and Flag Day. He loved to work hard behind the scenes, and often challenged the well-to-do to donate to worthwhile medical enterprises such as the Diabetes Centre in TTSH. He gave valuable advice to those who wanted to give – many, including the family of the late Khoo Teck Puat, benefited from his wise counsel. He also developed the profession of diabetes educators in Singapore, bringing in Peggy Huang from California to help in the beginning.

Mdm Lai Yee Khim wrote, "When I returned from my HMDP fellowship in 1991, I approached Dr J A Tambyah for my post-attachment recommendations. Although I was a stranger to him then, he was so readily willing to guide and help me along. Under the advisorship and guidance of Dr Tambyah and the headship of Professor Chee Yam Cheng,

the first comprehensive diabetes care programme with a multidisciplinary approach was set up in TTSH in 1993. Through Dr Tambyah's great support, another milestone was achieved when TTSH successfully recruited our nation's first podiatrist, Mr Tye Lee Tze, in February 1993, to take care of diabetic foot problems. With Dr Tambyah's very special and significant help, the Diabetes Care Fund was established in March the same year to help the needy patients. Dr Tambyah strongly encouraged and supported the formation of the Association of Diabetes Educators (Singapore) in 1997. The accreditation of Certified Diabetes Educators (CDE) in Singapore was made possible in 2004. His drive for good diabetes care has allowed many people with diabetes to enjoy better care and live more confidently.

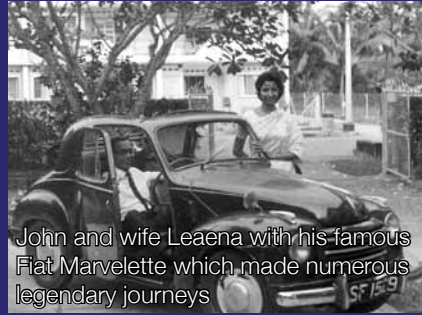
"Dr Tambyah will always be remembered for his passion in teaching and dedication to good quality diabetes care. He has inspired me and many diabetes educators to strive for higher standards of care for people with diabetes in Singapore."

Mr Tye Lee Tze, podiatrist, wrote to John in January 2011: "I personally shall always be grateful for what you've done for me. If it wasn't for you, I would not be in the position I am today and would not have the experiences I've had in Singapore. You were willing to give a very young upstart, whom you had no prior knowledge of, a chance. You went out of your way to help me, guide me and introduce me to the right people. You stuck your neck out and staked your reputation and your word on someone you didn't know. You did it out of the goodness and sincerity of your heart with no conditions or expectations in return. There are few people in this world who can change people's lives. I would count you as one of them. How do I know? Simply because you have changed mine. In today's world, it is so easy to get caught up in money, status, power and materialism. It is all around us and indeed one may be considered not normal if one's personal creed does not centre around these. However, it takes a person like you to not only remember that this is not the true way of how life should be lived – to live not for selfish means, but for selfless means. Such things as treating patients as real people, treating people the correct way, being of the highest integrity, and not being motivated by monetary gains but by genuine care and concern for fellow humans."

John the patient. He was a gentleman par excellence. Despite paraplegia, renal failure and enduring severe pain, he was a model patient – always polite, considerate and kindly. His son, Ananth, related an anecdote which illustrates how he always put others before himself to the end. While Ananth was examining at the final MBBS clinical exam on Sunday, a lab result showing life threatening hyperkalemia was received at home. Rather than interrupt the exam, John himself called the Mount Elizabeth pharmacy to arrange for resonium, calcium and dextrose to be obtained. Few doctor-patients have that kind of consideration. One of his patients, Julie Seow, wrote: "More than the privilege of having Dr Tambyah



John (second from left) with his Raffles Institution and medical classmates



John and wife Leaena with his famous Fiat Marvelette which made numerous legendary journeys



John and Leaena with his mentor Prof Seah Cheng Siang (far left)



The Medical and Dental Class of 1956 at their class reunion in December 1987 (John is standing at the third row from the front and third from the left)



John (far left) at the official opening of the TOUCH Diabetes Support Centre in November 2003



John (sitting), Tay Chong Hai (far right) and the staff of Tanglin Clinic, most of whom have been working together for the past 32 years

as my doctor, I am also honoured to have him as a mentor, friend and supporter. Dr Tambyah believed in the patient as the most important person in good diabetes care. He encouraged and supported my husband and me when we started the first support group in our home more than 20 years ago. What TOUCH Diabetes Support has been able to do in the past 20 years is, in no small way, due to a wonderful, caring doctor who believed in and went out of his way to help his patients. He has left a great example and his memory will live on in the many lives whom he has influenced to live well with diabetes."

John the friend. He was loyal, caring and supportive, and was not afraid to confront wrong. We all valued his opinion because he wanted the best for us.

John the Christian brother. I discovered this in the later stage of his journey. He is a man of deep faith – a private man. It made sense as I thought of his manner of life. In my many years with John, I have also

never seen the romantic side of my friend. When he was critically ill in the High Dependency Unit at Mount Elizabeth Hospital, he remembered to arrange to send Leaena the largest basket of red roses she had ever received on the occasion of their 47th wedding anniversary. He was a devoted husband to Leaena, loving father to Malini and Ananth, and doting grandfather to Arun, Keeran and Vikram.

John, my friend, brother, mentor and teacher. I wish you goodbye and will miss you dearly. SMA

In memory of John's dedication as a physician and his deep concern for medical students in financial distress, his family has directed all donations received to the SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund. If you would like to make a donation, please send your cheques to National University of Singapore, with "SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund" written on the back.