

Citation for Dr Charles Toh

*Dr Yan delivered this citation at the
SMA Annual Dinner on 14 May 2011.*

By Dr Peter Yan



Dr Yan delivering his citation at the SMA Annual Dinner

Mr President, our Guest of Honour Dr Tan Cheng Bock, distinguished overseas guests, learned colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen. I have the honour, pride and extreme privilege on this momentous occasion of presenting Dr Charles Toh for the conferment of the SMA Honorary Membership.

When one mentions Dr Charles Toh, there will be an immediate resonance that his name is synonymous with one of the founding fathers of modern Cardiology in Singapore. He is a distinguished cardiologist, an outstanding academician, an excellent clinical teacher and a great mentor for younger doctors. He is also an imminent physician who upholds the highest ethical standards and a doctor with a “servant’s

heart” who serves his patients, his colleagues and his country with great humility and sincerity and yet with dignity and honour, that earns him the trust, the respect and the admiration of those who know him.

Allow me to describe Dr Charles Toh in several chapters of his life.

Chapter 1: Dr Charles Toh – the Man and the Doctor

Charles was born in Ipoh, Malaysia in 1930. At 81 years, his biological age belies his chronological age. He epitomises the essence of longevity.

Charles received his early education at the Anderson School in Ipoh and then moved to Sydney Grammar School in Australia in 1948.

He then went on to obtain his MBBS degree in Sydney in 1955 and then his MRCP (London) in 1959, and finally his FRCP (London) and FRACP in 1973.

Charles's medical career began in 1955. He was a Resident Medical Officer at the Royal Newcastle Hospital, Australia until 1957. Subsequently, he joined the Central Middlesex Hospital in UK in 1958. In 1959 he became the Resident House Physician at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School at Hammersmith Hospital, UK. He then went on to obtain his Research Fellowship in the Department

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of Cardiology at the Hammersmith Postgraduate Hospital in London to pursue his dream of being a cardiologist. He also had a Resident Senior House Physician job at the Cardiac Department of the Royal Brompton Hospital, London in 1960.

Upon completion of his training in Cardiology, he returned to Singapore in 1961 and was appointed Lecturer and Physician at the University of Singapore, Department of Medicine and was subsequently promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1966. Three years later, he became Vice Dean and Acting Dean of the Faculty of Medicine between 1969 and 1972. At that period of time he was also promoted to Associate Professor in Medicine. He then left for private practice at Mount Elizabeth Hospital in 1975 and has been there until today. His professional career has spanned over 50 years.

Chapter 2: Dr Charles Toh – the Specialist/Cardiologist

Charles is truly one of the early pioneers in the field of modern Cardiology in Singapore. He played a pivotal role in shaping and transforming the landscape of Cardiology that has brought about a “world class Cardiology service” in Singapore. He became a Fellow of

the American College of Cardiology in 1971, an International Fellow in Clinical Cardiology, American Heart Association in 1985, and a Fellow of the American Heart Association in 2001. He was the President of the Singapore Cardiac Society from 1974 to 1975 and again from 1976 to 1977. He was also the Organising Chairman of the 5th Asia Pacific Congress of Cardiology in 1972, which was the first high-profile Cardiology meeting in this region.

His great intuitive insights into what the future of Cardiology should be earned him the respect of the government of Singapore, and he was tasked with the responsibility of advising the Ministry of Health on the formation of the National Heart Centre. Charles was appointed the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on the development of the National Heart Centre in 1996, and then as a member of the Executive Committee of the National Heart Centre from 1997 to 2000. The rest is history, as the National

Heart Centre developed into a renowned centre of excellence for the management of cardiovascular diseases.

In addition, for his immense medical knowledge and his firm belief in the pursuit of clinical research as a necessary requirement to achieve medical excellence and international recognition for Singapore Medicine, Charles was appointed the Chairman of the National Medical Research Council from 1994 to 2000, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, National Cancer Centre Research Fund from 2006 to the present, member of the Board of Trustees, Singapore Cardiac Society for more than ten years and member of the Subcommittee on Medical Specialisation from 1990 to 1991.

In his medical career, Charles has also published numerous papers, about 55 of them in both local and international journals.

Chapter 3: Dr Charles Toh – the Public Servant

Apart from his illustrious career as a cardiologist, Charles too held numerous positions in the public service sector. From 1968 to 1970 he was member of the Singapore Telephone Board. He was also a member of the Health Advisory Council (1986-90), a member

of the Disciplinary Panel of Public Service Commission (1968-74), Resource Member, Government Parliamentary Committee, Defence and Foreign Affairs (1987-90), member of the Education Service Commission (1993-98), member of the Public Service Commission since 1992 and Deputy Chairman of Public Service Commission (2010). The above have therefore, not surprisingly, earned him several prestigious national awards and honours which include the Public Administration Medal (Gold) in 1970, the BBM (Public Service Medal) on National Day in 1999 and the Public Service Star (Bar) in 2009.

Chapter 4: Dr Charles Toh – the Man I Know

I first knew Charles when I was posted as a medical student to the Department of Medicine, Singapore General Hospital in the early 70s, where he impressed me tremendously with his knowledge of Cardiology and also his teaching skills which, needless to say, were both legendary and inspiring. In fact, he was one of two great teachers who have inspired me to become a cardiologist, following in their footsteps.

Charles, together with his late beloved wife Vicky, raised three outstanding sons. His eldest son Han Shih has a PhD from Oxford and is currently a journalist at Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post*. His second son Han Chong is well known to all of you. He is the current Head, Department of Medical Oncology, National Cancer Centre and also the Editor of *SMA News*. His youngest son Han Li is a lawyer and currently Deputy Director of the Competitive Commission of Singapore under the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

As a doctor, Charles is impeccable. He puts the interest of his patients above and beyond his own self-interest. He exemplifies and upholds the eight great elements of medical professionalism (American Board of Internal Medicine, Project Professionalism [Monogram], 1995) beyond the Hippocratic Oath – altruism, accountability, excellence, duty, service, honour, integrity and respect for others. He abides by the philosophy of self-governance, lifelong learning and fiduciary responsibilities. His philosophy of caring for the sick, abiding by clinical practice guidelines, keeping healthcare costs affordable to his patients, and even providing free services to the sick who could not pay, is the greatest expression of Medicine at its altruistic best. Charles possesses the grace to always extend a favour to a patient, a junior doctor or a

friend freely and without any expectations of anything in return.

I remember when I was at the crossroads of my career in 1991, Charles gave me great advice. He supported and facilitated my entry into private practice by giving me an office space in his clinic and made his staff available to assist me. This was done freely without asking for any rental or payment for the services of his staff.

I learnt so much from working alongside him in private practice, especially with respect to upholding medical professionalism, issues of self-governance and professional ethics. Clearly, in private practice, the wary doctor is tempted by numerous incentives – such as performing excessive and unnecessary testing or treatment for profits, or in practising defensive medicine to ward off real or imagined litigation, thus raising medical costs and yet potentially increasing risks. Charles taught me how to get around these pitfalls and showed himself as a role model in upholding and maintaining the highest standards of medical professionalism. He inspired me to believe that in giving to others without expectations of something in return, one gains immeasurably in personal growth and fulfillment. My family and I are indeed blessed to have known him and we are forever grateful to him.

Finally, to me it is an honour and extreme privilege to have known Charles and to have worked with him for so many years. He is a truly a great man. Confucius once described the fundamental virtues of humanity which make a great man, namely humanity (仁), righteousness (义), good mannerism and politeness (礼), wisdom and prudence (智), integrity (信), loyalty (忠), filial piety (孝), honesty (诚), kindness and forgiveness (恕), bravery (勇), good and kind-heartedness (良), respect and reverence (恭) and frugality (俭). These virtues, values and qualities aptly describe Charles – the man, the doctor, his services to his patients and to his nation, and are continuously reflected in his life even today by his generosity in service, his humanity in execution and his moderation and humility in success. Yet in life, we shall find *many men that are great and some men that are good but very few men who are both great and good* (Charles Caleb Colton). Charles belongs to this latter group.

And so, Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I present to you Dr Charles Toh, for the conferment of the Honorary Membership of the Singapore Medical Association.

Thank you. **SMA**