

The Inaugural Seah Cheng Siang Memorial Lecture: Life and Times of Seah Cheng Siang*

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Prologue

When I was asked to deliver this first Seah Cheng Siang Memorial Lecture, I was deeply sensible of the honour the Academy has done to me. However, I questioned my credentials as I know that there are others who merit this more than I do, who had been more intimately associated with Cheng Siang and his works and who could do him more justice than I can this morning. It was therefore, with great diffidence and humility that I accepted the invitation from the Physicians of the Academy.

I have known Professor Seah Cheng Siang for 34 years. My first meeting with him was when I stepped into the wards of Professor Gordon Ransome commencing my six months posting in Medicine as a House Physician in Singapore (having spent the first six months of Surgery at the Queen Mary Hospital, Hong Kong). This was in July 1956 in Ward 45 of the old General Hospital of which Cheng Siang was the Medical Officer in-charge. He became an immediate mentor. I had, of course, heard much of his reputation and clinical prowess and that he had been awarded the Queen's Scholarship to pursue advanced medical studies in Britain. I had also heard that he was a demanding taskmaster and had an exceptional obsession to keeping meticulous clinical casenotes. I was therefore pleasantly surprised when he received me with a very warm handshake and led me to our first patient who had been newly admitted; a middle-aged Eurasian gentleman, a complex case of fever of unknown origin according to the admitting doctor's diagnosis. I was instantly impressed by the way he introduced himself to this feverish gentleman. He listened attentively to the patient's complaints and soon after went into questioning him in detail about his symptoms with extraordinary charm. Before long he had a complete description of the fever and the diagnosis of malaria became evident even before his deft examination confirmed the presence of splenomegaly and the positive blood test. The patient was delighted as the nature of his illness had been unclear for over a week.

We were a good team under Professor Ransome and Dr T J Danaraj. I learnt their clinical methods and Cheng Siang and I became fond friends. He left soon after for Edinburgh and obtained the MRCP in 1957.

I was again fortunate to be in Medical Unit I in 1959. Cheng Siang had returned successfully from his studies in Edinburgh and London. I was then preparing for the MRCP, obtaining valuable lessons and tips from Cheng Siang, Evelyn Hanam and Ronald Wells. Teaching was already an important pre-occupation and Cheng Siang ensured that his students, house physicians and young trainees were not only knowledgeable and competent, but he also instilled in them a sense of genuine interest and concern for their patients, their relatives and colleagues. In this regard, Tan Bock Yam, Lau Kam Seng and I will always remember his sacrifice with deep gratitude when he as Senior Registrar undertook to do our active call duties while we who were studying went only on passive calls.

Momentous events were by then unfolding in Singapore with the election of the PAP government in 1959 and the attainment of self-government. A new hospital at Thomson Road had been built. On returning to Singapore from Edinburgh in early 1961, I found that Cheng Siang had already established himself at this hospital with a new Medical Unit formed under his charge. As closer examination will reveal later, he had an excellent team in the early years comprising Andrew Chew, Lau Kam Seng, Wong Kum Hoong and Lee Hoe Guan. I had the privilege of joining him every Sunday morning on his rounds. This early association with Cheng Siang was to last throughout his life time especially because of our common commitment to Clinical Medicine and Medical Education.

HIS EARLY DAYS

Seah Cheng Siang was born on 9th March 1922 at Sarkies Road near Newton Circus. Although the Seah clan was well respected and known, he came from a relatively humble home where money was not abundant. Nevertheless he had a happy childhood in the company of his brothers, sisters and a multitude of cousins. Tragedy struck when he was

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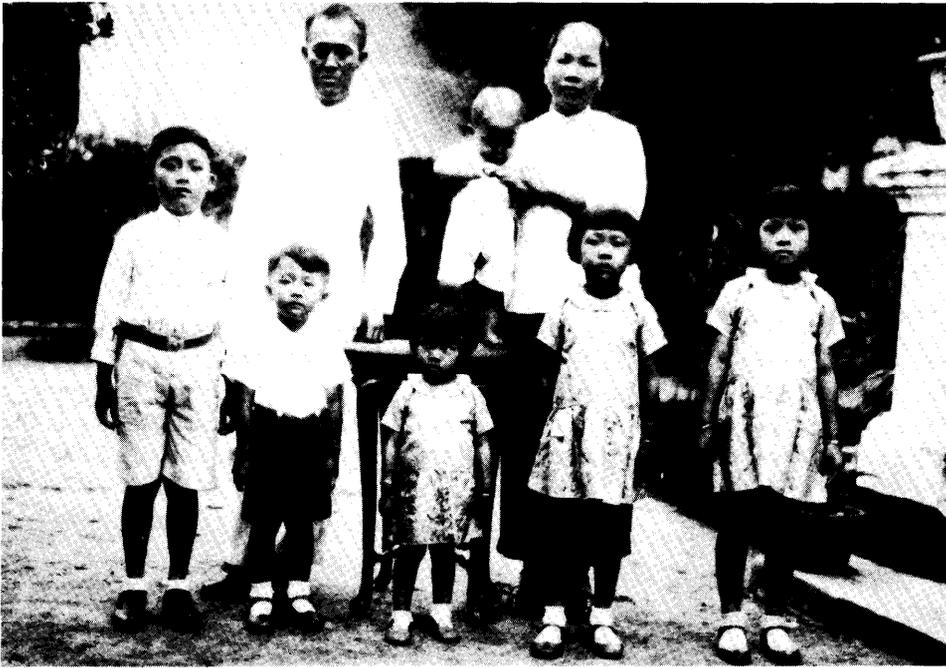


Fig. 1. His early days: the Seah Family with C S standing at extreme left.

eleven when he lost his youngest and possibly favourite sister from febrile convulsions. This was said to be the stimulus that led him to his life's calling. For his primary and secondary education, he attended Anglo Chinese School (ACS) and excelled not only in the arts and sciences, but also in sports, particularly in cricket and hockey. He was a diligent student and was always among the top in his class. He loved literature and learnt Latin which was then a prerequisite for the study of Medicine.' He was always loyal and grateful to the school. He later became the President of the ACS Old Boy's Association. The school's motto is: "The best is yet to be".



Fig. 2. The three generation family of C S and Margaret.

Perhaps it was for this that he cherished Robert Browning's works and in later years oft recited this favourite verse:

Grow old along with me!
 The best is yet to be,
 The last of life, for which the first was made
 Our times are in His hands
 Who saith "A whole I planned,
 Youth shows but half; trust God:
 See all, nor be afraid".

I believe this was also his life long motto.

He was admitted to the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1941 albeit as a dental student having won a scholarship. He was bitterly disappointed as he had no financial means to do Medicine. His studies were rudely interrupted by the Japanese occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945. This was to be a blessing in disguise not only to him, but to others because he was allowed to transfer from dentistry to medicine and of course, he met his life-long

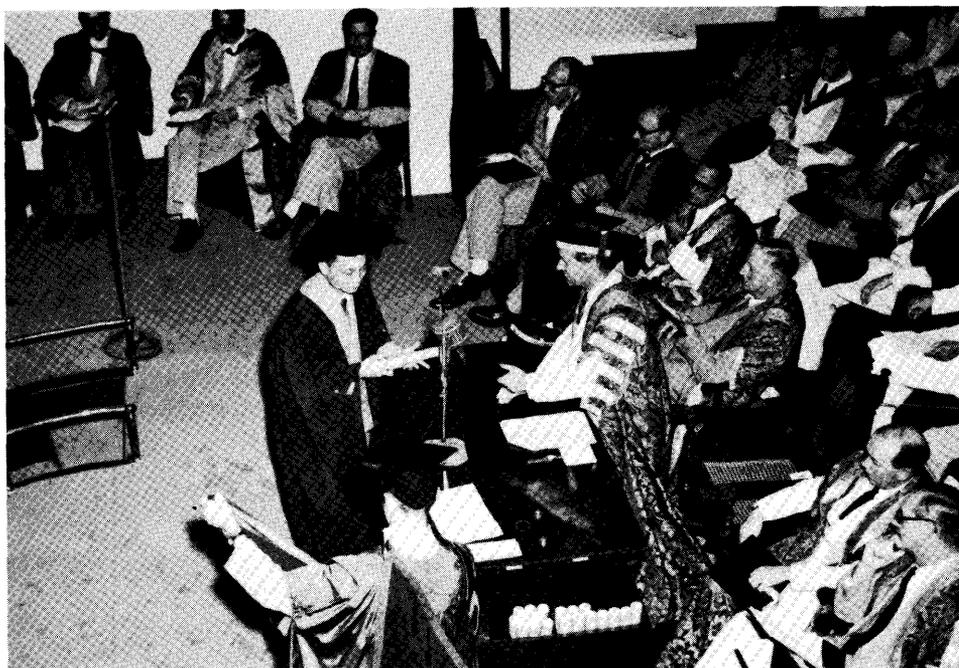


Fig. 3. CS being conferred MBBS by the Chancellor, Rt Hon Malcolm Macdonald.

partner in Margaret whom he married in 1954. They brought up a happy and special family in Marianne, Chang Un, Chang Yung and Joanna, their children and later David, Henry and Puay Hoon, their children-in-law and three grand children.

He continued to excel in the medical faculty and graduated MBBS in 1951 gaining top honours in Medicine, including the Brunel Hawes Gold Medal for Medicine and the Lim Boon Keng Medal for Clinical Medicine. Dr Wong Heck Sing, his friend since medical school days and later brother-in-law recalls "he loved his sports, his classical music and was never one to avoid taking part in discussions on medico-political or socio-economic issues". He was an active participant in student activities and served as the Council of the Students Union.²

MEDICAL UNIT I, SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL

Cheng Siang commenced his first posting as a House Physician at Medical Unit I under Gordon Ransome, the Professor of Medicine and T J Danaraj, Senior Lecturer. Ng Kok Teow was a fellow House Physician and Gwee Ah Leng and Evelyn Hanam, Medical Officers. Dr Hanam recalls that the Unit had 160 beds in four wards. Each doctor had a ward and was fully responsible for all the 40 patients under his care. They were taught and trained by Ransome and Danaraj to fully clerk and examine each patient with utmost care, undertake appropriate investigations only when relevant and have treatment instituted without undue delay, handling the more urgent patients first. Every patient was



Fig. 4. The College Cricket Team with C S in the foreground (right).



Fig. 5. Medical Unit I: Visit of Sir Stanley Davidson, PRCP (Edin), 1959.

supervised and the two consultants were available at all times, day or night for any difficult or unsolved problems. They had to review each case, ensure that notes were neatly written and correctly filed.³

Care to patients was of first importance. Training of doctors and teaching of medical students was thorough and Professor **Ransome** himself set an excellent example. He was a superb general clinician although his forte was in Neurology. In person he was very kind and gracious and treated every patient regardless of station with the same thoroughness, humble in all ways and always prepared to learn from others, including the lowly houseman, giving credit magnanimously when due and ready to admit his own mistakes. Thus, it was not surprising that Cheng Siang became an eager-eyed follower of this great physician and inherited much of his teachings and values. Alas **Ransome** was not the best of administrators, but fortunately this was made up by Danaraj, his Senior Lecturer who later planned the medical school at Kuala Lumpur and became the Dean and Professor of Medicine.



Fig. 6. The Great Physicians: CS with Sir Gordon Ransome.

Colleagues of Cheng Siang and house physicians who spent their early training in the fifties here included Yeoh Seang Aun, Wong Heck Sing, Wong Poi Kwong, Wong Hock Boon, Andrew Chew, Kwa Soon Bee, Wong Kum Hoong and Thong Kah Leong who became the Director of Medical & Health Services in Hong Kong.³ In 1956, Cheng Siang was awarded the highly coveted Queen's Scholarship for advanced studies in Britain. He obtained his doctorate in 1957 having undertaken a masterly study on lung abscesses in Singapore.⁴ He remained in the Unit, contributing to its high reputation until his transfer to Thomson Road Hospital in 1960.

THE MEDICAL UNIT AT THOMSON ROAD HOSPITAL

The PAP government was elected in 1959. Before this, the Hospital at Thomson Rise had just been completed by the previous government and was meant to serve the Chronic Sick. The new government being aware of acute shortage of general hospital beds decided that Toa Payoh Hospital then known as Thomson Road Hospital should instead become a general hospital. Cheng Siang was given the task of not only starting a Medical Unit, but also of administrating the hospital as Medical Superintendent. It was a very modest beginning with only himself as Consultant and Lau Kam Seng, his assistant who later became the Professor of Pathology at the newly established University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. He had to scout for patients particularly from the Medical Units at SGH who had overcome the initial problems of acute illnesses but required continued stay. They formed the core of the first patients of the Unit. Dr Andrew Chew, now Head of Civil Service and Permanent Secretary at the Prime Minister's Office and the



Fig. 7. Medical Unit, Thomson Road Hospital.

Ministry of Finance, recalls that in 1961 he joined Cheng Siang as Senior Registrar. Wong Kum Hoong and Lee Hoe Guan on returning with memberships later joined the Unit.' They are today distinguished practitioners in Singapore and Vancouver respectively. Cheng Siang therefore managed to assemble an excellent team. By that time, the Medical Unit had expanded, the quality of medical care soon became well-respected in Singapore and referrals were brisk.

As always, Cheng Siang insisted on a meticulous approach to be adopted by all grades of staff. The nurses were able to respond to his demands remarkably. Case notes were properly documented, assembled in the correct order and always kept neatly. He had a constant eye for detail and all these he insisted upon in order to achieve the highest standards of patient care.

It became a matter of time when medical students began to appear. Elementary clinics formally began and all the Registrars and Senior Registrars shared in the teaching with Cheng Siang as the only Consultant Physician. Discerning medical students and young doctors readily saw the value of his teaching and posting requests were naturally competitive.

Postgraduate teaching programmes were established and soon attracted general practitioners (GPs) and they began to flock in on Sundays for teaching rounds. This was Cheng Siang's early contributions to ongoing education for GPs. The Unit also became renown to visiting physicians from Australasia and Britain. The hustle and bustle at the hospital made it clear that it was a hospital in demand and no doubt, the physician in charge had contributed to overflowing patients from all over Singapore. By 1964, with promotions or transfers in personnel, a new team had emerged. Gradually Cheng Siang had a Surgical Unit formed under Choo Jim Eng. A full time medical superintendent, namely H F Jackson had also been appointed. Cheng Siang could now give his entire commitment to Clinical Medicine. His drive and energy during those early days also ensured that academic contributions to learned journals were not overlooked.⁵

Dr Chua Kit Leng, the present Head recalls that Cheng Siang became deeply interested in gastroenterology and he was the first local physician to systematically study the various aspects of liver cancer. Subsequently he and his colleagues became the first physicians to publish the diagnostic value of the Alpha foeto-protein test in Singapore. Amongst the trainees and registrars who were posted or who were eventually brought up in his Unit at Thomson Road were F J Jayaratnam, Lim Pin, Chua Kit Leng, Feng Pao Hsii, Chia Boon Lock, Loong Si Chin, John Tambyah and later Evelyn Mah and Cheng Heng Kock amongst others.⁶ All are well established today either in the government or private sector. He was also the first Singapore physician to use the Crosby capsule to obtain biopsies from the small intestines and to introduce the then revolutionary, fibre-optic gastroscope and camera in Singapore. His team managed

to publish several major articles on the incidence of gastrointestinal haemorrhage and the role of fibre optic gastroscopy of over a thousand patients.⁷ He left Thomson Road Hospital on appointment to the Headship of Medical Unit III at the Singapore General Hospital in 1971. By that time Thomson Road had gathered tremendous stature and its first decade could be considered a most satisfying chapter of Cheng Siang's life history.



Fig. 8. Medical Unit III, Singapore General Hospital.

MEDICAL UNIT III, SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO GASTROENTEROLOGY .

To cope with the demands of the early sixties, the formation of a third Medical Unit at the Singapore General Hospital was imperative. The Unit was officially opened in 1965, occupying the front portion of Bowyer Block with Dr Gwee Ah Leng as the first Head and Senior Physician.⁸ When he retired in 1971, it was entirely appropriate for Cheng Siang to be appointed to this post, then the most prestigious for a physician. He duly moved over in 1971 bringing with him some of his disciples who included F J Jayaratnam and John Tambyah. With Tay Chong Hai, Feng Pao Hsii and later Ng Pock Liok and Leong Sou Fong, they formed a formidable team at Medical Unit III. In 1972, he was appointed the first Clinical Professor of Medicine by the University. The high standards demanded by him continued relentlessly at SGH. Again he quickly built up a department of gifted and productive physicians. His interest in Gastroenterology and Hepatology had by then consolidated tremendously and although appointments and posting requests were competitive, many talented doctors were fortunate to join the unit and to establish themselves with Cheng Siang as their mentor. This was also possible because some such as John Tambyah, Ng Pock Liok, Leong Sou Fong and Tay Chong Hai had left to build up well respected private consulting practices while Jayaratnam and Feng Pao Hsii were transferred to head Medical Units at Tan Tock Seng Hospital on promotion.

The new team included Ng Han Seong, Teh Lip Bin, Kwok Kian Choo and Ong Yong Yau who was transferred from Tan Tock Seng Hospital to be Cheng Siang's deputy. They were ably supported by numerous Registrars, some not necessarily with a gastroenterological bent such as Koo Chee Choong, a cardiologist, Yeoh Swee Inn, an endocrinologist, Vathsala Anantharaman, a nephrologist and Tham Siew Nee, a dermatologist. They were there essentially for advanced medical training under Cheng Siang's tutelage and I have no doubt that they found those years invaluable to their career development.'

Clinical research and original observations were always encouraged and Cheng Siang ensured that academic contributions were not overlooked. He was always willing to support any member of the staff who wished to carry out investigative work. Whilst his interest was mainly on diseases of the gastrointestinal tract and of the liver, numerous papers were published on a wide range of other topics by him and his staff, for instance on hypertension, respiratory diseases,



Fig. 9. The Master with his Council.

systemic lupus erythematosus and other aspects of rheumatology and neurology. In his special field, he contributed over 120 papers to well respected and learned journals with principal authorship of over 40.⁸ Under his able guidance, the specialty of gastroenterology took off at Thomson Road and the Unit at SGH. The Gastroenterological Society was formed in 1968 and later the National Foundation of Digestive Diseases in 1987, the result of his influence and stimulation. He was the first President and Chairman of the bodies respectively and remained so for many years. He was President of the Asian Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver in 1984 and in 1986 presided over the association's international meeting. He has often been fondly referred to as the Father of Gastroenterology in Singapore and was held in high esteem internationally. In 1984, he was conferred the Fellowship of the American College of Gastroenterologists and the following year, of the American Gastroenterological Association.

In 1987, Cheng Siang retired as Head of the Unit, but continued serving the Unit and our hospitals as a doyen Adviser and Senior Physician, doing till the very end what he always loved to do, to care for the sick and to teach.

POSTGRADUATE MEDICAL EDUCATION — THE ACADEMY OF MEDICINE AND THE SCHOOL OF POSTGRADUATE MEDICAL STUDIES

The Academy of Medicine, Singapore, was established in 1957 and its principal objectives were “to advance the art and science of Medicine; to maintain and promote the highest standards of professional practice and high code of ethical conduct”. With such a mission, it was only natural for Cheng Siang to find himself actively involved with this corporate body. He became a Member in May 1959, Council Member in 1966 and was its Master from 1970 to 1973.

Even before he formally became a Member, Cheng Siang was actively participating and lecturing in refresher courses for medical practitioners organised by the Academy which included topics on Cardiology, Neurology and Respiratory Diseases.

Soon after induction as an Academician, he was deeply involved in the preparation of a Memorandum on Organised Postgraduate Medical Teaching which the Academy submitted to the Ministry of Health and the University of Malaya then at Singapore in 1959.⁹ The outcome was the formation of the Committee on Postgraduate Medical Education in 1961 by the University with representatives from the relevant professional associations, including the Academy. Advanced courses in Medicine and Surgery were run regularly in the sixties and Cheng Siang became the Chief Coordinator for Advanced Medicine with active participation from the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and Members of the Academy.

The next important phase in our medical annals was when Dr Toh Chin Chye, then Deputy Prime Minister, made a policy speech shortly before he assumed the office of Vice-Chancellor, calling for the establishment of local higher medical qualifications. This was prominently reported in the Sunday Times on 9th October 1967.¹⁰ Almost immediately



Fig. 10. The Governing Board, School of Postgraduate Medical Studies, 1988.

after, I recall receiving phone calls from Professor K Shanmugaratnam, the Master and shortly after by Cheng Siang proposing for an emergency Council meeting to respond to Dr Toh's speech. This was held on 1 lth October 1967 with six of us attending, namely K Shanmugaratnam, Yahya Cohen, the Assistant Master, Lee Yong Kiat, the Scribe, Seah Cheng Siang, Chew Chin Hin and Yeoh Seang Aun.¹¹ A letter was soon drafted and sent to Dr Toh by despatch the day after. He promptly agreed to meet us and I remember vividly the morning coffee we had with him in the Prime Minister's Conference Room at City Hall on 4th November 1967 at 11.30 am.¹² That meeting was historically significant because it led to the establishment of the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies and the formation of its governing Board in 1969. To this day, four members of the Academy (excluding the Master who is an ex-officio member) sit equally in numbers with four members from the University on this joint Body.



Fig. 11. The Examiners, M Med (Internal Medicine) Examination, June 1990.

Cheng Siang was a founder Member and remained so until his final illness. In addition, he was the first Deputy Director of the School, Chairman and Chief Examiner for Internal Medicine from its inception to 1988. Right from the beginning, Cheng Siang and his colleagues ensured that the standard attained at the examinations was of the highest order and in no way less than that required for corresponding qualifications of the Royal Colleges in Britain and in Australasia. The Board also laid stress on training requirements before a candidate could sit for the examination. This emphasis on training was further ensured by the selection of doctors as trainees in the various disciplines by a Selection Board at the Ministry of Health. Regular advanced courses were also run by the School with teachers comprising both local as well as invited lecturers from Britain, Australasia and later the States. Also from its inception, external examiners were appointed from the Royal Colleges in Australasia and Britain for each Master of Medicine (M Med) Examination. They themselves had been examiners in their respective Colleges. In this way, it has been possible to ensure that successful candidates achieve comparable standards to those in Australia and Britain. Indeed official recognition by the Royal Colleges came early and external examiners have regularly attested to the high standard of these examinations in their reports.¹³

Since 1970, over 800 doctors have successfully completed higher examinations of the School compared to only about 100 before this when such examinations had to be taken overseas either in Britain or Australia. This is a very high proportion of the doctor population in Singapore.

Although these achievements stand in high relief, the question of further training for the graduands arises as the acquisition of a degree of M Med is not an end point, but rather the beginning of advanced specialist training. Thus, in 1974 the Academy submitted a Memorandum on Specialist Certification and Registration to the Ministry of Health and to the Singapore Medical Council. This was the result of several hours of intense discussion Cheng Siang had with me as Master and Robert Loh as Assistant Master. This was followed a year later by the formation of a Standing Committee on Specialist Training and Certification detailing requirements for specialist certification. Cheng Siang thus played a very significant role in this regard and was a signatory as immediate Past Master to the Memorandum of 1974.¹⁴ I am pleased to add that due to his foresight over 15 years ago, the Singapore Medical Council has now accepted the principles of the proposal. The concept of structured basic and advanced specialist training followed by certification and specialist registration will be implemented shortly. Both the Academy of Medicine and the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies have a significant role to play in the matter of certification and in ensuring the maintenance of high specialist standards.^{15,16}

On yet another aspect of medical specialisation, Cheng Siang played an important role in the Academy's Committee on Medical Specialisation for Singapore in 1970. At the invitation of the Ministry of Health, this Committee submitted a well informed document with recommendations to the Ministry's Committee in March 1970. In this regard, Mr Chua Sian Chin, the then Minister stated that "the Academy can take pride in having influenced significantly the recommendations of the Committee".¹⁷ These have been implemented and in the seventies led to the establishment of specialist departments of Cardiothoracic Surgery and Cardiology, Neurosurgery and Neurology, Renal Medicine, Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery and Paediatric Surgery in the Singapore General Hospital and Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Many other specialty departments have since been established.

However, Cheng Siang's interest was not only in specialist medicine, but extended to continuing education and the upgrading of standards for practitioners of family medicine. Thus in 1969 he through the Singapore Medical Association and the Academy felt that it was crucial for the formation of another academic body. In this way, Cheng Siang played an important role when the College of General Practitioners was founded in 1971. This was duly acknowledged and recognised when he was conferred the Honorary Fellowship (Hon FCGP) by the College in 1973.

LINKS WITH THE COLLEGES IN THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE STATES

As Master of the Academy, Deputy Director of the School and Chief Examiner in Internal Medicine, he knew that it was important for him to cultivate close personal ties and friendships with Presidents and senior fellows of sister colleges in Britain, Australasia and the United States. To him and his colleagues, this was vital if Singapore was to develop a high standing internationally. Indeed it was through these links the Academy and the School now enjoy harmonious relationships and close ties with numerous Colleges in the Commonwealth and the States. These relationships have now been formalised through the signing of Memorandum of Understanding with over ten Royal Colleges in the Commonwealth. In this regard, some Colleges deserve special mention.

Cheng Siang's first trip abroad was to Britain in 1956 and in particular, Edinburgh. It was only natural for him to have a special affection for the Edinburgh College of Physicians of which he became a Member in 1957, a Fellow in

1968, and later the College's Regional Advisor and Overseas Representative. He held a unique position in Edinburgh and was a special guest at the Tercentenary celebrations in 1981.

Cheng Siang then wrote: "25 years ago I came to Edinburgh. All at once I liked the city and its people whose honesty, sincerity and friendliness I admire. The links between the doctors of Singapore and the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh have been long and cherished". He went on: "In essence, Edinburgh-trained doctors in the twenties laid the foundation. Subsequently, the links were strengthened by Singapore doctors who sought postgraduate education in the United Kingdom and many were successful in attaining the MRCP and who, on return, stimulated the beginnings of Continuing Medical Education. . . I am particularly happy to record my sense of pride and loyalty to the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh."¹⁸ Dr James Syme, Chairman of the Overseas Committee wrote: "Cheng Siang was a source of much guidance and kindly wisdom to the Committee and he was immensely loyal and always helpful to the College".¹⁹ In the October 1990 issue of the Proceedings of the College, Professor John Richmond, the President wrote: "In June I had the pleasure of returning to Singapore with my wife for the M Med Internal Medicine Examinations. Among the Internal Examiners was an old friend and loyal Fellow Dato Professor Cheng-Siang Seah. Despite recurrent illness he was in good spirits. Sadly he died a few days after the examination and I am glad we were able to pay the College's respects to his widow before returning home. Cheng Siang was our overseas representative and we shall deeply miss his wise counsel."²⁰ Professor Richmond was an old friend whom Cheng Siang had invited to be an external examiner when he was Chief Examiner.

In the sixties through Colombo Plan Aid from Australia, supported by the enthusiasm of Sir Kenneth Noad, President of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and later Sir John Frew (President 1972-74) and their colleagues, advanced courses leading to the MRACP examinations were held in Singapore with Cheng Siang as the Chief Co-ordinator. The early teams also included Stan Goulston, Bryan Hudson and Allan Kerr Grant who became Presidents in later years. Initially part of the training and the clinical examination had to be taken in Australia. However, with time the whole examination was conducted in Singapore with examiners coming not only from the College but also locally. This collaboration was also a tremendous boost to post-graduate medical education. Links were established and strengthened and even today we have our colleagues from Australasia coming to take part in our M Med courses and examinations. Cheng Siang earned a tremendous measure of respect from all his friends in the College with tributes coming from numerous past Presidents. Byran Hudson wrote: "He was indeed a great friend to Australasian Medicine and did much in those early days to make it possible for us to participate in those early educational programmes. To all of us he was the epitome of the complete physician."²¹ He was tremendously pleased when the College admitted him through a special provision to the Fellowship in 1968 and in the 1970s elected him to the Council. In this regard, Ronald Winton wrote in the College's official history: "His election could not be said to be based on any geographical consideration. It simply reflected the high regard in which he was held by Fellows in Australia, New Zealand and South East Asia".²²

Closer collaboration with the Royal College of Physicians of London was also forged especially in the seventies. He was to earn the friendship of numerous Presidents and Senior Censors of the College especially of those who participated in our Advanced Courses or as external examiners. These included Sir Douglas Black, Sir John Badenoch and Dame Sheila Sherlock. In 1986, the College formally recognised Cheng Siang's contribution to Medicine and Medical Education and conferred him its Fellowship through direct election.

We had also in recent decades turned our sights to the United States in the area of postgraduate training and have been establishing formal ties with several well respected medical centres.

The American College of Physicians was founded in 1915 "to uphold high standards in medical education, medical practice and medical research". Today the College is the world's largest body of Physicians and sub-specialists in the fields within or related to Internal Medicine."

In 1983, I had the pleasure of proposing Cheng Siang for direct election to the Fellowship and I wrote: "Besides being the person responsible to a large measure for the teaching of postgraduate medicine in Singapore, Professor Seah has also contributed enormously to the teaching of undergraduate medicine. He has seen and nurtured several generations of doctors over three decades and many are now holding high positions both in Academic Medicine and Public Service". The College was duly pleased to elect him to its Fellowship in 1984 and he became one of three Fellows of the College from Singapore at that time.

SERVICE TO THE SINGAPORE MEDICAL COUNCIL AND COMMUNITY

The Singapore Medical Council was established as a statutory body for the medical profession and is responsible for

the maintenance of high standards of medical education, practice and ethical conduct. Cheng Siang had always held dearly his responsibilities in the Council.

The President, Dr Teoh Hoon Cheow wrote: "Professor Seah Cheng Siang was first elected into the Singapore Medical Council in April 1969 and became its President from 1972 till his retirement in March 1989. This 20-year span is even more remarkable in that it was uninterrupted. During his long tenure of presidency, significant changes have taken place. From the usual role of tackling the problems as they arose, the Council under his leadership began to identify problems of the medical profession and actively sought to find appropriate solutions. . . Under his Chairmanship of the Committee on Continuing Medical Education, this important programme has been successfully launched. His conduct of meetings and disciplinary inquiries was done in his inimitable style. His valuable contributions over these years has been greatly appreciated by the Council".²⁴

As with Sir William Osler, he held the dictum that "the practice of Medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head".²⁵ For Cheng Siang, the doctor's first responsibility is and will always be to his patients and to society in general, that this should take much precedence over material compensation and that the commitment to the patient is not ever to be taken as optional. Indeed this fundamental principle has stood the test of time from the days of Hippocrates. These essential values of conduct have been described as medical ethics.

In this age of new techniques of diagnosis, treatment and medical breakthroughs, there exists a tremendous excitement for technological developments. While many of these would be positively beneficial to mankind, Cheng Siang had always felt that the medical profession will increasingly be faced with an unprecedented variety of complex and difficult problems. In all these, he cautioned, the art of Medicine stands constantly in danger of contamination and we as doctors must apply our science and our ministrations with all understanding and sympathy. Society has conferred much of the professional prerogatives doctors now enjoy. In turn, doctors are responsible and accountable to society for their professional and moral actions. They hold as it were a franchise granted by society, the rights, privileges and duties pertinent to the patient-doctor relationship. These rights and privileges can be withdrawn if they are not exercised responsibly.²⁵ His contribution to the Medical Council brought him tremendous satisfaction. He was the longest serving and without doubt, a most distinguished President of this highest body of medical peers.

As a doyen in Singapore's medical field, it was not surprising that Cheng Siang's counsel was sought by numerous committees, including those of the University and the Ministry of Health such as the University Council, the Ministerial Committee on Problems of the Aged under the chairmanship of Mr Howe Yoon Chong, the then Minister and the Committee on Medical and Recreational Needs of the Aged, of which he was Chairman. In addition, he served on the Ministry's Medical & Clinical Research Committee and on the Expert Committee for Liver Diseases. In all these fields, his contribution was immense. He was a familiar figure with the St. John's Ambulance Association and Brigade for many years and in 1983, was admitted to the Venerable Order of St. John.

NATIONAL HONOURS AND AWARDS

For a man who had done so much, it was not surprising that due recognition was given to Cheng Siang through the conferment of several high national honours.

In 1970, he was conferred the Public Administration Gold Medal (the PPA) by President Yusof Ishak of Singapore. Extracts of the citation read: "Dr Seah is an outstanding Physician. In 1960 he became Physician at the Thomson Road General Hospital. Soon after that he took over as Medical Superintendent. . . . The general belief was that standards there did not compare with those prevailing at the first General Hospital. By his organisational ability and his professional competence, Dr Seah built up the reputation of the Thomson Road General Hospital and established public confidence in the competence of their medical treatment".²⁶

In 1975, he together with Professor Wong Hock Boon was invested with the Meritorious Service Medal (the PJG) by the President of Singapore, Dr Benjamin Sheares. Their joint citation included: "Professor Wong Hock Boon and Clinical Professor Seah Cheng Siang were the two most active founders of the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies in 1969. Before the School was established, our doctors had to go abroad for specialist training. This postgraduate school increased the number of specialists. The standards set by the school are no less than those of established British and Australasian Colleges. Both professors are distinguished men in their own right".²⁷

In addition, for his contribution and service to communities even beyond our shores and to the Royal Family of the State of Johore, he was bestowed the Datoship (SPMJ) by His Royal Highness, the Sultan of Johore in 1980.



Fig. 12. National Day Honours: The PJG from the President, Dr Benjamin Sheares, 1975.



Fig. 13. Johore State Honours: The SPMJ from HRH the Sultan of Johore, 1980.

Epilogue

Seah Cheng Siang was a truly remarkable man and an outstanding figure of our time and generation. When his death was reported in the *Straits Times*,²⁸ President Wee Kim Wee was quoted in the article as follows: “Singapore has lost a terrific doctor and a fine Singaporean”.

Tributes came from near and afar. It was clearly evident that he had earned universal respect and admiration for his many contributions to Medicine. It was also evident that he had inspired a tremendous measure of affection. Mr David Marshall, our Ambassador to France and the first Chief Minister numbered him as “One of our truly great men, dedicated with sincerity and humanity to the welfare of fellow human beings throughout his life”.²⁹



In an address some years ago in reference to Cheng Siang's mentor, Sir Gordon Ransome, I identified two pre-requisites for a person to be numbered amongst the truly great.³⁰ First, he should be a good man in the fullest sense of the commonly abused adjective. This quality was abundantly evident from the numerous tributes received. The second pre-requisite is that the man must multiply himself in his disciples so that he leaves no vacuum. Alas all too many otherwise great men had failed to do so. Amongst those whom Cheng Siang had taught, trained and nurtured, many now enjoy positions of eminence and they include a Head of Civil Service, Permanent Secretaries and Directors of Medical Services, a Vice-Chancellor, numerous Professors of Medicine, Senior Physicians and teachers who are in turn passing on his teachings to yet many others.

His manner was always kindly to his patients and in his heart pure to many. They ranged from the lowly man in the street to Presidents and Royalty. One of his former students wrote: "He met me at the hospital corridor. He was walking from Medical Unit III towards Surgical B Unit. I was standing at the entrance of Ward 10, dishevelled and forlorn looking. My father was there in a coma because of a severe head injury sustained in a road traffic accident. It was Professor Seah, sensing my distress who approached me and then accompanied me to see my unconscious father. He spoke some encouraging words and held my father's hand and felt his pulse. Again, this could be nothing more than a gesture on his part. He knew it and I know it too. My father had a huge cerebral haemorrhage. I will always remember this demonstration of his understanding and sympathy".³¹

He more than fulfilled his own demand that a professor should have three things: enthusiasm, a full personal knowledge of his subject, and a sense of obligation to his students. Osler declared that happiness lies in absorption in some vocation which satisfies the soul, that we are here to add what we can to, not get what we can from life.³² Cheng Siang gave freely and he received abundantly the love and the admiration of the many generations of doctors he inspired. This must have been a source of deep satisfaction to him. In one of his philosophical moments in the hospital bed, he confided quietly to me that it was such satisfaction that had enabled him to bear success with humility, the affection of his friends without pride and be ready when the day of final rest came to meet his Lord with courage befitting a man. Indeed when those moments came on 23rd June 1990, I would like to think that this last gift was added to him, shining clearly till the end.

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