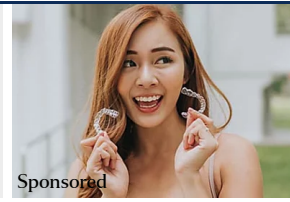




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Obituary

Healthcare pioneer Kwa Soon Bee dies



Dr Kwa, who died yesterday aged 86 after suffering a stroke last week, had a long and distinguished career in the medical services and was the first local doctor to specialise in haematology. MOH paid tribute to him, calling him a "true pioneer" of healthcare in Singapore. TNP FILE PHOTO

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Ex-permanent secretary spearheaded growth of hospitals and laid foundation for local healthcare system

Pearl Lee  (mailto:leepearl@sph.com.sg)

Pioneer-generation civil servant Kwa Soon Bee died yesterday morning, at the age of 86.

He had suffered a stroke last week and was hospitalised.

Dr Kwa, who was born in 1930, had a long and distinguished career in the medical services during which he laid the foundation for Singapore's healthcare system.

LIFETIME OF DEDICATION

Many of the leaders he nurtured are now playing leading roles in Singapore's healthcare system. MOH, healthcare professionals, and indeed all Singaporeans, are indebted to Dr Kwa for his lifetime of dedication and commitment to developing Singapore's healthcare system.

HEALTH MINISTER GAN KIM YONG.

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He joined the civil service as a medical officer in 1956 after graduating from the King Edward VII College of Medicine at the University of Malaya here, and retired from public service in 1996 as permanent secretary for health and director of medical services.

He was the first local doctor to specialise in haematology, the study and treatment of blood and blood-related disorders, and later helmed Singapore General Hospital (SGH).

Dr Kwa was a younger brother of Madam Kwa Geok Choo, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's mother, who died in 2010.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) said in a statement yesterday that Dr Kwa was a "true pioneer" of healthcare in Singapore.

Health Minister Gan Kim Yong added that Dr Kwa laid a strong foundation for the nation's modern healthcare system.

"Although I never worked with Dr Kwa directly, I have benefited from the legacy he left behind, 20 years after his retirement," he said. "Many of our current hospital buildings and polyclinic facilities were built or redeveloped during his tenure as permanent secretary and director of medical services."

The "3M" framework - Medisave, MediShield and Medifund - which Dr Kwa implemented has also kept

LASTING LEGACY

Dr Kwa spearheaded the modernisation of our medical services. He pushed for and led the efforts to rebuild the Singapore General Hospital.

But his legacy was not only in hardware development. More importantly, he pushed for the specialisation of the medical services and a sustained programme to upgrade the training and capabilities of our doctors, nurses and other allied health professionals.

He helped in my career and I learnt so much from him, not just on how to run a hospital and manage an office, but also on how to live a fulfilling life.

COORDINATING MINISTER FOR INFRASTRUCTURE AND MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT KHAW BOON WAN, who worked under Dr Kwa as a young civil servant.

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CARING MENTOR

I was privileged to have served under him, and recall his dedication to bringing out the best in those around him. He always provided wise counsel, clear guidance and strong leadership. He paid attention to the career development of junior staff... He was my mentor and inspiration.

FOREIGN MINISTER VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN and former chief executive of Singapore General Hospital, in a Facebook post.

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healthcare affordable for all Singaporeans, Mr Gan added.

Dr Kwa received a Singapore government scholarship, shortly after starting his medical career, to study in Britain, where he specialised in clinical and laboratory haematology.

He was put in charge of the Blood Transfusion Service on his return in 1963, and led the drive to significantly increase blood collection here.

In 1968, he was appointed medical superintendent of the then Kandang Kerbau Hospital and put in charge of reorganising it, as well as implementing family planning programmes. He became medical superintendent of SGH in 1972, and chaired its planning committee, which oversaw the development and building of the current hospital.

In 1984, he was appointed permanent secretary for health and concurrently director of medical services. In that role, he spearheaded the redevelopment of public hospitals and institutions including Changi General and Tan Tock Seng hospitals and the Institute of Mental Health, as well as the development of specialist centres and polyclinics.

Dr Kwa also started the national healthy lifestyle programme, and chaired Jurong Bird Park for 20 years, as well as Wildlife Reserves Singapore which brought together the park, Singapore Zoo and Night Safari. He also played a key role in developing the Singapore Armed Forces medical corps.

MOH noted that Dr Kwa also led the corporatisation of public hospitals to make healthcare services more efficient and responsive, and said: "He personally nurtured many of our healthcare leaders of today."

A year after Dr Kwa retired in 1996, he was conferred an honorary fellowship by the Singapore Medical Association.

Professor Tan Ser Kiat, master of the Academy of Medicine, said then that Singapore's healthcare institutions were "testimony to his farsightedness, vision and skills as administrator, professional and planner".

He added that Dr Kwa "systematically and meticulously identified, talent-scouted and trained staff" for the health service, and advocated the development of ancillary health professionals like nurses, physiotherapists and radiographers.

SGH also paid tribute to Dr Kwa's contributions, noting that his involvement with it started in 1951, when he had his clinical training.

"Despite his various responsibilities, Dr Kwa would always have time for his fellow colleagues - to chat, to listen, to guide and encourage. Regardless of seniority or designation, he treated his staff as friends, with respect and equal regard," it said in a Facebook post.

"At the 1996 SGH gala dinner and dance, Dr Kwa said: 'As one who has been closely associated with the developments of the hospital from the early 1950s, I can sincerely say that my best memories have been the times spent within its wards, walking the corridors of the old and new hospitals amongst friends, at work and at play,'" SGH added. "We have lost a great leader, mentor, clinician and friend."

Dr Kwa will be cremated tomorrow.

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