



CHAPTER OF

*Public Health &  
Occupational Physicians*



*A History of the Chapter of Public Health and  
Occupational Physicians*

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## ABSTRACT

The Chapter of Public Health and Occupational Physicians was formed in 1980, 23 years after the founding of the Academy of Medicine in Singapore. From a modest beginning with 12 foundation Fellows, the Chapter has provided professional leadership and continuing education in public health and occupational medicine. It has organised numerous talks, conferences, seminars and symposia, and a very successful series of annual scientific meetings. The content of these activities reflect the concerns and developments of public health and occupational medicine in Singapore throughout the last quarter century. Fellows of the Chapter serve on national specialist training committees and on academic programme committees of both specialities. The Chapter also provides recommendations to the Academy on specialist qualification and training. With an active current membership of 100 Fellows, which is still growing, the Chapter is poised to further raise the professional standards and practice of public health and occupational medicine in Singapore.

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of the Chapter of Public Health and Occupational Physicians began with the founding of the Academy of Medicine in 1957. It was the first professional corporate body of medical and dental specialists in Singapore.<sup>1</sup>

At that time, there were already public health practitioners trained and practising in Singapore. As early as 1953, the University Department of Social Medicine and Public Health (SMPH), with assistance provided by the World Health Organization introduced the Diploma of Public Health (DPH), which was the first diploma course offered in postgraduate medicine in Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

However, the Chapter formally came into existence in 1980. On 15 May 1980, 12 members of the Academy wrote to the Council to request the formation of a Chapter of Community Medicine. During the Annual General Meeting of the Academy on 29 November 1980, it was moved that a new Chapter be formed, called Chapter of Community and Occupational Medicine, since the Academy had joint certification for both specialities. The inaugural meeting of the chapter was held on 21 January 1981 under the Mastership of Dr Lim Pin, at which 33 members of the Academy were present.<sup>3</sup> The first Chairman of the Chapter was Dr Phoon Wai-On, Professor and Head of the University Department.

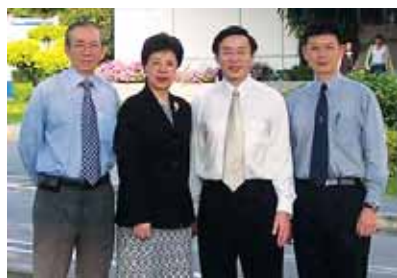


Fig. 1. Professor Phoon Wai On, Chairman of the Organising Committee making his opening speech.

## MEMBERSHIP AND CHANGES IN THE NAME OF THE CHAPTER

From its original 12 foundation members in 1981, membership of the Chapter has grown steadily. Membership numbers increased to 30 in 1982, 41 in 1987, 61 in 1992, 75 in 1997, and 93 in 2002. By 31 December 2005, in its 25<sup>th</sup> year of existence, membership of the chapter stood at 100 members.<sup>3</sup>

The name of the Chapter has also undergone changes to reflect the changing terminology of the disciplines. From the original Chapter of Community and Occupational Medicine, the Chapter was re-named the Chapter



*Fig. 2. From left to right: Prof Lee Hin Peng (Chief examiner), Dr Margaret Chan (Director-General, WHO, and external examine for Public Health course in NUS), Prof David Koh (Chief examiner) and Dr Richard Tan (external examiner, Occupational Medicine course), NUS centennial year, 2005.*

of Community and Occupational Physicians in January 1987, and subsequently to the Chapter of Public Health and Occupational Physicians in June 1999, which remains till today.

## ACTIVITIES OF THE CHAPTER SINCE ITS FORMATION

In the first years of its existence, many prominent speakers were invited to give presentations to the fledgling Chapter, among them Dr Peter Taylor, Dean of the Faculty of Community Medicine, Dr Chao Tzee Cheng, Dr K Kogi, Dr JC MacDonald, Dr JM Last, Dr R Rylander. Since then, many other internationally renowned speakers have supported and contributed towards the activities of the Chapter.

The first Visiting Academician, who was appointed in 1983, was an icon in public health. He was none other than the late Sir Richard Doll. He gave very well received presentations on "Epidemiological discovery of occupational cancer", "Prevention of cancer - practical prospects", "Update on asbestos and cancer", and "Cervical cancer - an infectious disease". There has been only one other Visiting Academician appointed – Professor Devidas Menon, an expert in Health Technology Assessment - who was appointed more than 20 years later in 2005.

The conferences, seminars and symposia that have been organised by the chapter throughout the years mirror the changing emphases and trends of public health and occupational medicine. Among the early conferences organised by the chapter were the 10<sup>th</sup> Asian Conference on Occupational Health in September 1982 (the next Asian Conference on Occupational Health will be organised in Singapore again in 2008), the Third Conference on Epidemiology in Occupational Health (September 1983), and the International Epidemiological Association's meeting in October 1983. Another regional conference of the International Union for Health Education (IUHE) was held in July 1990.

## SYMPOSIA AND SEMINARS

The Chapter also organised many successful symposia and seminars, as listed in Table 1. The titles of the symposia give insights to the concerns through the years, and the development of community medicine and occupational medicine in Singapore.

## ANNUAL SCIENTIFIC MEETINGS OF THE CHAPTER

The Chapter began to organise its own annual series of Scientific Meetings since 1993. These meetings combine both public health and occupational medicine topics, and are highlights of the Continuing Professional Development calendar for trainees and specialists in Public Health and Occupational Medicine. Table 2 lists the various themes and dates of the scientific meetings organised by the Chapter. Several luminaries have been invited as keynote speakers at the annual scientific meeting, including Dr Margaret Chan, presently the Director General of the World Health Organization and previously Director of Health in Hong Kong; Professor

Table 1. *Symposia and Seminars organised by the Chapter of Public Health and Occupational Physicians, Academy of Medicine Singapore (1986-2004)*

- Symposium on prevention of female cancers (Nov 1986)
  - Symposium on cardiovascular epidemiology (Jan 1987)
  - Symposium on interface between community, occupational and family medicine
  - Symposium on occupational effects on fertility and pregnancy (Aug 1987)
- The above 2 symposia were held in conjunction with the opening celebrations of the College of Medicine building.
- Symposium on mental stress at the workplace (Sep 1988)
  - Symposium on civil aviation medicine (Oct 1988)
  - Symposium on community paediatrics (Nov 1988)
  - Seminar on ethics in occupational medical practice (Aug 1990)
  - Symposium on emerging issues in the epidemiology of injuries (organised as part of the 24th Singapore Malaysia Congress of Medicine Sep 1990)
  - Seminar on issues and guidelines on HIV Infection/AIDS and the workplace (Sep 1994)
  - Symposium on civil aviation medicine (Feb 1995)
  - Symposium on the older worker (held in conjunction with the 34th Singapore Malaysia Congress of Medicine, Aug 2000)
  - Symposium on evidence-based health promotion (12 Nov 2001)
  - Symposium on continuing professional development in public health and occupational medicine (Aug 2004)
  - Symposium on developments in public health and occupational medicine (Aug 2004)
- These symposia were held in conjunction with the 38th Singapore Malaysia Congress of Medicine, held in Singapore.

Table 2. *Annual Scientific Meetings of the Chapter of Public Health and Occupational Physicians, Academy of Medicine Singapore (1993-2006)*

- First scientific meeting of the Chapter "Healthy living – the next lap" (Jan 1993)
- Combined scientific meeting – Community and Occupational Medicine "Caring for people's health" (Feb 1995)
- 4<sup>th</sup> combined scientific meeting, Community and Occupational Medicine – "Disease screening and information technology in health care" (Feb 1996)
- 5<sup>th</sup> combined scientific meeting, Community and Occupational Medicine – "Work, environment and health – challenges for a healthy city" (Nov 1996)
- 6<sup>th</sup> combined scientific meeting, held in conjunction with the 32nd Singapore Malaysia congress of medicine in Singapore Aug 1998. It is interesting to note that the keynote lecture for this event was "Managing the influenza (H5N1) epidemic in Hong Kong", which was delivered by Dr Margaret Chan, the Director of Health, Hong Kong. The keynote lecture was followed by a symposium on "Emerging and re-emerging diseases".
- 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Scientific Meeting, Public Health and Occupational Medicine. "Health care in the new millennium" (15 Sep 2001). The keynote speech for this meeting, entitled "Healthcare in the Life Sciences Era", was delivered by Prof Tan Chorh Chuan, Director Medical Services, Singapore.
- 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Scientific Meeting. "The economics of health and healthcare" (Nov 2002). The keynote address was delivered by Mr Moses Lee, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health, and he spoke on the topic of "Developing the world's most cost-effective healthcare system".
- 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Scientific Meeting (April 2004). The keynote lecture was entitled "The role of public health and occupational physicians in the new millennium", and the lecture was delivered by Professor Lee Hin Peng.
- 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Scientific Meeting of the Chapter in April 2005. This meeting was re-named as the First Singapore Public Health and Occupational Medicine Conference and had the theme of "New Frontiers in Public Health and Occupational Medicine".
- Second Singapore Public Health and Occupational Medicine Conference, July 2006. The theme for 2006 was "Challenges in Public Health and Occupational Medicine - Bridging the Gap" and the keynote speaker was Professor K Satku, a past Master of the Academy and presently the Director of Medical Services in Singapore.

Tan Chorh Chuan, presently Provost of the National University of Singapore and previously Director of Medical Services in Singapore; and Professor K Satku, presently the Director of Medical Services in Singapore and previously Master of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore.

## **A NEW DEVELOPMENT IN 2005 – DISTANCE LEARNING**

In November 2005, the Academy launched its distance learning programme. The Chapter of Public Health and Occupational Physicians submitted one module for the distance learning programme on “Malignant mesothelioma”.

## **THE CHAPTER’S ROLE IN TRAINING OF SPECIALISTS**

The Chapter also plays an important role in the training of specialists in public health and occupational medicine. In 1987, subcommittees for Community Medicine and Occupational Medicine were formed to make recommendations to the Academy on specialist qualification and training. The Chapter also has representatives in the Division of Graduate Medical Studies for the academic programmes in Public Health and Occupational Medicine.

In addition, all the current members of the Specialist Training Committees in Public Health and Occupational Medicine are also Fellows of the Academy and members of the Chapter.

## **WHAT NEXT?**

After being in existence for over 25 years, what developments are there on the horizon? Two possible issues may be worth considering. Firstly, with a membership of 100, the chapter may have reached a critical mass when it may now be an opportune time to consider having a College of Public Health and Occupational Medicine within the Academy of Medicine. Six of the 10 Chapters (Anaesthesiologists, Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Paediatrics and Child Health, Physicians, Radiologists, Surgeons) of the Academy were incorporated as Colleges on 17 August 2004, and it may be advantageous to incorporate the Chapter into a College. Secondly, with the increasing number of members, the development of subspecialties or special interest groups within the Chapter e.g. Epidemiology, Health Administration, Aviation Medicine appear to be a natural progression for the Chapter.

## **CONCLUSION**

From this review of the activities of the Chapter of Public Health and Occupational Medicine, it is evident that from its humble beginnings, the Chapter has significantly contributed to the development and growth of the specialties of Public Health and Occupational Medicine in Singapore over the last half century. With an increasing membership, and new additions to the talent pool, the chapter is poised to continue with its important work to further raise the profile and professional standards of both specialties in Singapore.

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