

A Century of Medical Students' Activities (Medical College Union/Medical Society)

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Abstract

The Medical College Union (MCU) was formed in 1922 to encourage and promote comradeship and public spirit amongst the students of King Edward VII College of Medicine. The Medical College Union Society was founded and held its first meeting on 31 July 1936. However, the Annual Report for 1940-42 made no reference to the Society at all and it was hence considered to cease to exist as an official body. The Medical Society (Medsoc), headed by Mr Goon Sek Mun, was formed in 1949 and it organised various activities and events for the faculty. Some of these are still being held annually today, with the addition of several others and phasing out of some. These were organised by the individual subgroups in the Medical society, like the Social, Welfare, Sports and Publications committees. The Medsoc also acts as the students' voice in conveying their opinions to the administration and the Dean. With the expected advent of a new medical school in Singapore – a postgraduate one in the Outram Campus, the medical student community in Singapore will only get larger. There should be a role for Medsoc to foster closer ties between the student communities.

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1905 to 1942

On 3 July 1905, the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School was started with the objective of training the local men and women to become Assistant Surgeons and General Practitioners. After a petition set out by the Chinese and non-European communities to the then Governor of the Straits Settlement, Sir John Anderson KCMG, and funds were successfully raised, the first Medical School formally opened on 28 September 1905. The School's initial enrolment was 23 students, and it offered courses in medicine, surgery and midwifery.

In 1912, the name of the College was changed to the King Edward VII Medical School. The name was further changed to the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1920 to recognise its academic status as a university-standard institution.¹ The Medical College Union (MCU) was formed in 1922 to encourage and promote the camaraderie and public spirit amongst the students of King Edward VII College of Medicine.^{2,3} It also emulated the previous students' recreation club in promoting physical exercise through various sports and games. A committee of ten members, which included a President, a General Secretary, a Treasurer, Captains of Cricket, Tennis, Football and Indoor Games, a Secretary to the Literary Department, and two other members led the union.

The Constitution was amended in 1923 to include the advancement of welfare to the College and its Alumni, in addition to its original objectives. The General Committee

was enlarged to include three more members to undertake the added responsibility. In 1933, the Constitution of the MCU was again amended, making ordinary membership compulsory for male students while female students remained eligible for election as lady members. An addition of two members to the General Committee brought its total membership to 15.

Subsequently, the Medical College Union Society was founded, and its first meeting was held on 31 July 1936.⁴ Mr Yeoh Boh Choon was its first Chairman and Mr AWS Thevathasan its first Honorary Secretary. The activities organised by the Society included talks given by guest speakers on medically related topics such as Customs and Religion in Medicine and Medical Ethics. However, over the next few years, the Society held no meetings and was regarded as defunct. The Annual Report for 1940-42 made no reference to the Society at all and it ceased to exist as an official body.

A medical student from Malacca named Yoong Tat Sin was interested in reviving the Medical Society in 1940. However, he could not garner sufficient enthusiasm among the students to see it through. In 1941, he had the assistance of Mr S Sivanason in this project. But tragedy struck with the onset of the war.

The Japanese Invasion and Occupation (1941 to 1945)

It was Saturday, 14 February 1942, a day before Singapore fell to the Japanese. Mr Yoong was fatally wounded by

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Japanese artillery while on duty at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH). He passed away shortly after and was to be buried at sunset that fateful day. Further tragedy struck during the burial of Mr Yoong. Ten other students were killed that evening. All 11 slain members of the Medical College Union were subsequently buried close together on the grounds of the Singapore General Hospital.

Prior to the fall of Singapore to the Japanese military forces, the government, in an attempt to stem the Japanese advance, had mobilised all available manpower to the war effort. During this time, the King Edward VII College of Medicine contributed by supplying personnel to the local Medical Auxiliary Service (MAS). Hence, over 200 of its medical students were posted to the hospitals or first-aid posts. Casualties were heavy and the MAS worked 12 to 18 hours a day.^{5,6}

Eventually, Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. With the British surrender, our local doctors were left to manage Kandang Kerbau (KK) Hospital, TTSH and the Mental Hospital on their own. These hospitals were used to treat the locals. The General Hospital, however, was requisitioned by the Japanese army for the treatment of their own casualties. Hence, the staff and patients of the General Hospital were transferred to the Mental Hospital, which was used as a provisional General Hospital.

During the Japanese occupation of Singapore, Singapore was renamed *Syonanto*. The Japanese Military Administration established the Medical College on 27 April 1943 and it was known as *Marei Ika Daigaku* or the Syonan Medical College. It was sited at TTSH (*Hakua Byoin*). About 200 students from Singapore, Malaya, Sumatra, and Java attended the Syonan Medical College; students were mainly taught Japanese language and culture.

The academic aspects of medical practice continued through the war years. Medical students who were in their clinical years continued to receive clinical instruction from the local doctors. Twenty-nine medical students qualified in the final examinations conducted by the local doctors. Courses in tropical diseases like malaria were conducted to equip them with the relevant knowledge. These medical students went on to pass a subsequent qualifying examination held by the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1946 with flying colours.

With the defeat of the Japanese in August 1945, the Medical School buildings were returned to the Medical College authorities on 1 April 1946 and teaching resumed on 17 June 1946, when 200 of the prewar students returned.⁷

The Role of the Alumni Association and the Medical College Students' Union in Events Leading to the Inauguration of the University of Malaya

In 1947, the Secretary of State for the Colonies appointed

Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders as chairman of the Commission to make recommendations for the development of university education in Malaya. The initial intention was to create a university college as the first stage in the development of a University of Malaya. After an extended discussion between Sir Alexander and the medical student representatives, which included the President of the Medical College Students Union (Mr K Shanmugaratnam), a favourable impression was left on Sir Alexander and he agreed that a University should be formed without it being preceded by a University College. He realised that the standard of work done in the Colleges (King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College) was higher than he had been given to expect. A report from the Carr-Saunders Commission was submitted to the Governments in February 1948 and the University of Malaya was inaugurated in October 1949.⁸

The Medical Society (Medsoc), headed by Mr Goon Sek Mun, was formed in 1949 and it organised various activities and events for the faculty. Some of these are still held annually today, with the addition of several others and the phasing out of some. These are organised by the individual subgroups in the Medical Society, like the Social, Welfare, Sports and Publications committees. In the 56 years of its service thus far, it has added much colour and vibrance to student life in the Medical School, providing welcome breaks from the sometimes tiring continual imbibition of knowledge.⁸

Further Developments from the Postwar Years to the Present

In the 1950s, the Medical Society organised day-trips to the General Hospital in Johor Bahru for our students to learn how medicine was practised in our closest neighbour.⁴ In the 1970s, exchange programmes were organised for the students, where they were attached to hospitals in Hongkong, Australia, Denmark and Italy, allowing them to gain wider exposure to the practice of medicine elsewhere. This way, they could learn about better medical techniques and practices, and could also be taught to appreciate the existing conditions at home. They paid a minimal sum to participate. Study tours were also organised, and these consisted of trips of a few days' duration headed by our lecturers, to hospitals in Thailand and China. Students from Juntendo University, Tokyo have visited us since the 1960s, and our students visit them in Tokyo during their vacation. These abovementioned activities, however, are suspended intermittently due to poor response. The latter exchange activity continues to this day.

Films used to be shown in the 1960s and the 1970s, and they were quite popular. The films were mostly documentaries pertaining to medicine, and they were screened in the lecture theatres. Also, students then

commemorated War Memorial Day on 14 February to pay tribute to the medical students killed during the war.

Fund-raising activities used to be largely limited to the sale of festive cards to the public and those with faculty ties to the medical fraternity. These have largely been superseded by the sale of flowers and dedications during Valentine's Day, as well as the sale of a variety of products to the university students at stalls set up in the science foyer. Also, at the beginning of the academic year, freshmen sell flags to the public at popular places.

Where welfare is concerned, the student body is well taken care of. Subsidies are given to our needy students to help them purchase medical instruments. The annual Medical Instruments Fair allows students to obtain their equipment from a range of vendors at discounted prices. In addition, used medical books are collected from the students to be sold to their juniors, providing yet another way of helping students to cope with the financial concerns in medical school.

The Medsoc also acts as the students' voice by conveying their opinions to the administration and the Dean. Popular issues raised recently were the basis of the high school fees, the frequent fee hikes, and problems encountered by the students in the wards. Although solutions or agreements are not always reached, there is, at least, a healthy exchange of views, and the administration is made aware of students' concerns. The Medsoc has succeeded in acquiring better facilities and equipment for the students, like the Students' Lounge, where they can relax and interact after classes.

Community welfare has not been overlooked either, and each year, our students volunteer to perform health screenings for the public, and dispense health advice to them at the same time. During the SARS period, Medsoc helped to coordinate the temperature screenings for university candidates taking the exams. Other activities include excursions to old folks' homes, where our students can appreciate the living conditions of certain members of society and while assisting in the homes, learn how to be better doctors in the future. This has stretched to places beyond our shores recently, whereby students take part in the building of facilities and infrastructure, and health education in rural regions in Myanmar, Cambodia and Indonesia.

For freshmen entering the faculty, the Orientation Camp helps them to adjust more quickly to life as medical students, and allows the seniors and juniors to know one another better so that it is easier for the latter to seek advice when they encounter any problems subsequently. After the camp, freshmen are tasked to build a float to compete with those from the other faculties. This helps to foster camaraderie among the students and they learn the importance of teamwork, which is essential in the practice

of medicine. An initiation ceremony is held after that to formally welcome them to the medical fraternity.

The sportsmen in our midst can enjoy themselves and clinch prizes by taking part in the many sports activities. There are inter-faculty, inter-medical as well as inter-varsity games and they have been doing quite well. Acting talents can take part in the annual inter-medical play competition, Playhouse, which showcases these aspiring actors and actresses. Those who are musically talented can perform at Culture Nite, with items ranging from singing to playing musical instruments. During the Christmas season, students sing carols at homes and hospices, for their fellow students, and at public places, to spread festive cheer.

Every year, Medsoc organises a party at a popular nightclub, like Zouk, where students can have a great night out with their classmates and let their hair down. Over the years, Medsoc has played an ever-increasing role in the lives of the medical students, enhancing their student experience as well as helping to shape them into better doctors. It will hopefully take us to greater heights in the years to come.

The Present and the Future

With the expected advent of a new medical school in Singapore – a postgraduate one in the Singapore General Hospital, the medical student community in Singapore will only get larger. There should be a role for Medsoc in fostering closer ties between the student communities, who will be separated by geography, but not by their common goal. An exciting challenge awaits the present Medsoc in the near future to create a united forum for all medical students and to inculcate a sense of belonging for them in their journey towards fulfilling their dreams of becoming doctors.

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