

Centenary of the Faculty of Medicine, National University of Singapore and the National University of Singapore (1905-2005)

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The Faculty of Medicine (FOM), National University of Singapore (NUS) is 100 years old on 3 July 2005. The National University of Singapore (NUS) dates its origin from that of the Medical School; hence NUS is also 100 years old on 3 July 2005. A centenary is a rare event in the relatively short history of Singapore: the centenary of the FOM, NUS and NUS deserves to be celebrated with fanfare for a whole year!

The FOM, NUS was inaugurated on 3 July 1905 as the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School (SFMSGMS).¹⁻³ In 1912, the name of the SFMSGMS was changed to the King Edward VII Medical School, Singapore when it received a donation of \$124,855 from the King Edward VII Memorial Fund to found a King Edward Professorship.⁴ In 1921, it became the King Edward VII College of Medicine.⁵ In 1949, the College of Medicine amalgamated with Raffles College to become the University of Malaya, and became its Faculty of Medicine. In 1962, it

became the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Singapore. In 1980, the University of Singapore merged with the Nanyang University to form the NUS.

On 28 February 2005, Mr Khaw Boon Wan, the Minister of Health launched the book "*To Sail Uncharted Seas*" published by the FOM, NUS to commemorate its centenary.⁶ This is a beautifully illustrated coffee table book; perhaps this issue of the *Annals* may be regarded as the academic companion to this book.

A hundred years is a long time; the number of topics that can be included in this issue is infinite. We have chosen topics that we consider relevant and interesting; hopefully our omissions would be filled by other publications marking the Centenary of the FOM, NUS and NUS.⁶ To begin at the beginning, "*The Founding of the Medical School in Singapore in 1905*" is written by Dr Lee Yong Kiat, the doyen of medical historians in Singapore. Five years later in 1910, the first batch of students graduated as doctors with

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the diploma of LMS (Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery); there were 7 graduates in May and 6 graduates in December. Of these 13 first batch of graduates we have been able to find some information on 6; only the career of Dr Chen Su-Lan is well documented.⁷ The career of the first batch and subsequent batches for almost a century more than fulfill the aspiration of the founding fathers of the Medical School in 1905. Dr Chen Su-Lan (1885-1972) was the first name on the first batch of graduates; he was not only a very successful medical practitioner but also a humanitarian and philanthropist; he campaigned vigorously against the evils of opium smoking.⁷ He did his alma mater proud and his alma mater reciprocated by conferring on him the Honorary Degree of Letters of Law (LLD) in 1952. The Medical School functioned continuously for almost a century except during the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945). During the Japanese Occupation, the Japanese Government restarted the Medical School as the “*Marej Ika Daigaku*” (or Syonan Medical College)⁸ from 1943 to 1945 but there were no graduates.

Following the footsteps of Dr Chen Su-Lan, numerous alumni have distinguished themselves professionally and socially. Besides the first graduates in 1910, we have chosen to highlight 2 of our most distinguished alumni: in Singapore, President Benjamin Henry Sheares (1907-1981) and in Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahatir Mohamad (born 1925). The public life of Dr BH Sheares is well known and well documented; he graduated from our Medical School in 1929 at the age of 21. He was the first alumnus to be appointed a full professor in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1951. He rose to the highest office of Singapore as President in 1971; he died as President of Singapore in 1981. In this issue, his life and times are told by his son, Dr Joseph Sheares; it is a worthy tribute by a worthy son to a most worthy father.

Tun Dr Mahatir Mohamad was born in 1925 in Alor Star, Kedah, northern Malaysia. He graduated from the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1953. He became the fourth and longest serving Prime Minister of Malaysia for 22 years (1981-2003). When we invited him to contribute an article for this issue of the *Annals*, he accepted graciously and replied “*It is a great honor to be ranked with Professor Sheares, who was my teacher in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. I have put down in writing a little of what I can remember of University days and my subsequent career.*” His article on “*The Singapore Years and Subsequently*” is a gem and a historic one and will be read with great interest by all those interested in the history of Singapore and Malaysia in the post-war era. The story of Tun Dr Mahatir Mohamad is further elaborated by Dr Ong Hean Teik (a cardiologist in Penang, Malaysia) quoting from the extensive publications of the Tun.

During the 5-year medical course, the students are taught subjects ranging from the preclinical to the paraclinical and clinical curriculum. The major departments in the medical curriculum have recorded the history of their departments (in teaching, research, staff and development) over the past 100 years.

The students and their activities are given prominence in this issue. Dr Paul Tambyah writes on “*The Selection of Medical Students in Singapore: A Historical Perspective*”. “*A Century of Medical Students Activities (Medical College Union/Medical Society)*” is narrated by 3 final-year medical students (Low SW, Gan WT, Tan WK). Dr Lim Kuang Hui writes on “*The Medical Students Society and Medical Students Publications*” while Dr Lee Hin Peng (Master of the Hall) writes on “*King Edward VII Hall of Residence - A Link with the Medical School Since 1916.*” When the Japanese invaded Singapore in 1942, 9 medical and 2 dental students were killed by the Japanese bombing on 15th February 1942; their heroism and sacrifice are referred to several times in this issue; the definitive account in great detail has been written in 1987 by Dr Abdul Wahab,⁹ an eyewitness to this tragedy.

Many other interesting and historical articles are included in this issue. No writing is complete and no account of history is complete and totally accurate. A few of the great teachers of the Medical School are recalled in “*To Sail Uncharted Seas*”;⁶ perhaps the greatest in the post-war era was Dato Sir Gordon Arthur Ransome (GAR). Many know that Professor Ransome was a great physician and an extraordinary diagnostician but few know of his generosity; in 1950, Mr Navroji Rustomji Mistri (a patient of GAR) gave GAR \$1 million (for GAR to use as he saw fit) and GAR promptly gave the bulk of this donation (\$950,000) for the building of Mistri Wing in the Singapore General Hospital.¹⁰ Mistri Wing had 300 beds for paediatric patients and was opened in October 1955. In December 1994, it was converted for use as the Singapore Heart Centre. The past Principals/Deans of the Medical School are listed in “*To Sail Uncharted Seas*”;⁶ Professor Wong Poi Kwong (PK) was dean from 1972-1980. He was a student of GAR and in later years a colleague in Medical Unit I, SGH. PK is a “perfect gentleman” in his signature bowtie; he was also a very generous man and few know that PK was instrumental in securing the knighthood for Sir Gordon Ransome.

In 1929, the School of Dentistry was established in the King Edward VII College of Medicine and in 1935, the School of Pharmacy;⁵ hence an article on Dental Education is included in this issue.

Medicine may be largely a body of knowledge, but healing is a personal skill. The art of healing is best taught and acquired at the bedside. The early teachers of the King Edward VII College of Medicine imparted to subsequent

generations of doctors the British medical school traditions of student clerkship and bedside teaching. Providing important interaction for the doctor, patient and a small student group, bedside tutorials are a key component of medical education. An emerging trend in the 1990s amongst major teaching hospitals in many parts of the world is the propensity to respond to financial pressures by expanding outpatient activity, reducing length of stay, downsizing inpatient capacity, and increasing labour productivity. All these responses would have implications on the training of doctors.

We started at the beginning (“*The Founding of the Medical School on 3 July 1905*”); we end with very bright hopes for the future. Professor John EL Wong, Dean, FOM, NUS writes on “*The Future of Medical Education: The Second 100 years*”. A second medical school at Outram Campus is scheduled to take in its first batch of graduate students in 2007; Professor Soo Khee Chee writes on “*Singapore’s Proposed Graduate Medical School – An Expensive Medical Tutorial College or an Opportunity for Transforming Singapore Medicine?*”

In this issue, we conclude in poetic triumph: the recent successful battle against SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in Singapore is a tribute to the professionalism, dedication and sacrifice of all our graduates; Professor Woo Keng Thye, a poet and nephrologist, pens his poem on “*Battle at River Sars.*”

Let the Faculty of Medicine, National University of Singapore Flourish! Let the National University of Singapore Flourish! Let our Graduates Flourish! Let Singapore’s Second Medical School at Outram Campus Flourish! Let Singapore Flourish!

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Addendum

As we go to press we are delighted to learn that the FOM, NUS has received a \$100 million donation from the Yong Loo Lin Trust (The Straits Times, 7 April 2005); the Medical Faculty will be named the “Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine”. Dr Yong was born in Kuala Lumpur and graduated as a medical doctor from The University of Hong Kong in 1923 and subsequently became a successful businessman. A Chen Su Lan Professorship in Medical Ethics will also be established in the FOM, NUS (The Straits Times, 9 April 2005). A grand centennial medical dinner will be held at the Istana on 3 July 2005. Indeed the FOM, NUS is Flourishing!!