

# The Founding of the Medical School in Singapore in 1905

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## Abstract

This article traces briefly the origins of medical education in the early years of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang and Malacca), which culminated in the founding of Medical School in Singapore in 1905. The first attempt was made in the early 19th century, when boys were recruited from local schools as Medical Apprentices to be trained as “assistant doctors”. They were to assist the British doctors and doctors from India in running the medical services. This scheme was not successful. There are 3 landmark years in the evolution of medical education in the Straits Settlements, namely 1852, 1867 and 1904. In 1852, the Governor, to relieve the shortage of staff in the Medical Department, instructed the Principal Civil Medical Officer to organise a proper course of training for Medical Apprentices and to establish a local Medical Service. This scheme was also unsuccessful and the Straits Settlements continued to rely on doctors recruited from India. In 1867, the Straits Settlements were transferred from the India Office to the Colonial Office and became a Crown Colony. The Indian Government requested that all its doctors be sent back. This would have led to the collapse of the Straits Settlements Medical Service. As a stop-gap measure, the Governor offered the Indian doctors appointment in the new Straits Settlements Medical Service, and at the same time arranged with the Madras Government for boys from the Straits Settlements to be trained in its Medical Colleges. The first 2 boys were sent in 1869. In 1889, the Principal Civil Medical Officer proposed to the Governor that a Medical School should be founded in Singapore, but not enough candidates passed the preliminary entrance examination. The plan was shelved and boys continued to be sent to Madras for training. In 1902, the Committee on English Education proposed that a Medical School should be started in Singapore, but senior British doctors opposed this. On 8 September 1904, Mr Tan Jiak Kim and other local community leaders petitioned the Governor to start a Medical School, raised enough funds to establish the School and the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School (predecessor of the King Edward VII College of Medicine, and the Faculties of Medicine, University of Singapore and University of Malaya) was founded on 3 July 1905.

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The King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore, was founded in 1905, and produced its first graduates in 1910. Its diploma of Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (LMS) was recognised by the General Medical Council in 1916. Its direct descendants today are the Faculty of Medicine, National University of Singapore, and the Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya.

The Straits Settlements, comprising Singapore, Penang and Malacca, were British possessions for nearly 130 years. Penang and Malacca are now constituent states of Malaysia, and Singapore is an independent sovereign republic.

A brief history of the establishment of the Straits Settlements and its administration is a necessary introduction to this article.

In 1786, Sir Francis Light acquired Penang; in 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles acquired Singapore, and in 1824, by the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, Malacca was transferred to the British in exchange for Bencoolen on the west coast of Sumatra. Thus by 1824, the 3 British settlements were established, and by 1826, they were known as the Incorporated Settlements of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca, with Prince of Wales Island (Penang) as the capital.

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The headquarters of the Civil Medical Department of the Straits Settlements was in Penang and the Government Medical Services were very modest in the early years. There was a Senior Surgeon (sometimes called the Superintending Surgeon), the professional and administrative head of the Service in Penang, and an Assistant Surgeon at each of the 3 settlements. (The term “Surgeon” denoted a rank, not that the holder was a “surgical specialist”.) These doctors were assisted by a few Medical Subordinates, e.g., Apothecaries, in the performance of their duties. The designation “Apothecary” was also a rank. It did not denote that the holder was a “pharmacist or druggist”. They were actually “second-class” non-British doctors who had not obtained their qualifications in the United Kingdom. They had obtained their medical qualifications from Indian Medical Colleges, and were treated as assistant doctors by the British.

In 1832, the capital was transferred to Singapore and, in 1835, the headquarters of the Medical Department also moved to Singapore, where the Senior Surgeon made his official residence.

Early developments in medical education and medical services took place in Penang as it had been founded 33 years before Singapore and had been the seat of government until 1831.

The Settlements were administered as part of India, and were dependent on the Government of India (East India Company) for personnel to staff its hospitals and run its medical services. As India is about 2000 miles away, in the days of the sailing ships, replacements were hard to come by whenever vacancies occurred as a result of death or ill-health. It was difficult to get officers to volunteer for service as the Straits Settlements in the early years were regarded as backward, and service there was considered a “hardship posting”.

The situation was even more critical where the Medical Subordinates were concerned. It was possible for a Medical Officer to supervise all the hospitals and medical services in a Settlement, but the actual work was almost entirely borne by the Subordinates.

To remedy this, the man on whose shoulders lay the burden of trying to cope with increasing demands with limited staff, the Senior Surgeon, proposed that local boys should be trained for the Medical Department. He submitted a plan to the Governor on 28 August 1822. The plan was to obtain Apprentices from the Penang Free School, bind them for 5 years, and pay them a salary of \$6 per month while they were under training and \$10 a month when they had qualified to perform their duties. The plan was approved as “judicious” by the Governor and Council.

The highest rank for Medical Subordinates was that of Sub-assistant Surgeon (The designation was later changed

to “Apothecary”. The next junior rank was “Assistant Apothecary”). British Medical Officers held the ranks of Assistant Surgeon, Surgeon and Surgeon-Major. In those days, only Britons could be Medical Officers, whereas the ranks of the Medical Subordinates in the East India Company were open to both Britons and Indo-Britons (Eurasians).

In March 1823, 1 boy was selected and, in October 1823, 3 more. When their periods of apprenticeship expired, they were designated as Assistant Apothecaries, and given a salary of 50 Rupees a month. (Rupees and Dollars were both legal tender. The rate of exchange was roughly 2 Rupees to 1 Dollar.) In 6 years, the first attempt at medical education produced only 2 trained men for the Medical Service as 2 had been sacked for negligence. In Singapore, only 2 local Apprentices had been trained, 1 in 1833 and the other in 1839.

In 1841, Senior Surgeon Montgomerie strongly recommended to the Governor that the Government should be more vigorous in its efforts to train local men. He preferred to train them rather than recruit Apothecaries from India who “*would be comparatively inefficient from ignorance of the language, habits and customs of the native patients under treatment, some being natives of different parts of China speaking many different dialects, Cochinese, Siamese, Burmese, Malays, Bugis and Javanese, besides the natives of the Malabar and Coromandel coasts; and if available would, as everything is very expensive, require a considerable addition to the pay they receive in Continental India.*”

Only 1 more Apprentice was indentured in 1844. Stringent Government financial controls contributed to the shabby treatment of the Apprentices and the Straits Medical Subordinates. They were poorly paid. There was no organised teaching, no promotion prospects and no provision made for them on retirement. Boys were not keen to join. They had better prospects as clerks in commercial firms where the pay was better and the work less arduous. Apothecaries in the Service were always tempted to leave for better prospects in the private sector. Some were dedicated and remained in the Service. Two were selected for mention by Senior Surgeon Oxley in 1847:

“... These two young men emulate each other in zeal and attention. Without the benefit of regular medical education, they have possessed themselves of a very thorough knowledge of Pharmacy, are competent to manage Fractures and Wounds in emergency, and that with no mean skill, and are not without a considerable knowledge of the practice of Medicine...”

The Government did nothing to improve the working conditions or the salaries, and continued to rely on Apothecaries recruited from India. Dependence on

Apothecaries from India had its problems. The supply was precarious, and those recruited were not the best men available. Some were incompetent, some rogues.

In October 1849, the Governor was still undecided about the value of training local men. In 1852, Mr EA Blundell became Officiating Governor of the Straits Settlements when Governor Butterworth was away on sick leave. This year may be considered a landmark in the history of medical education in Singapore.

On 18 October 1852, Senior Surgeon Oxley wrote to the Officiating Governor on the subject of perennial shortage of staff in his department, and once again recommended the training of local men who knew the languages and the people of the country. Mr Blundell was interested in the proposal and asked the Senior Surgeon for a detailed plan “*to organise a Medical Establishment for service in the Straits Settlements by the indenture and education of Medical Apprentices from the schools of the several Stations.*”

Oxley lost no time in formulating a plan for the organisation of a Subordinate Medical Establishment. The detailed Rules and Regulations covered, among other things, entrance qualifications, syllabus, examination, salaries and conditions of service. Four Apprentices were to be educated in Singapore, 2 in Penang and 1 in Malacca. These were approved. The Officiating Governor expressed that he would be greatly pleased to eventually see a few Chinese boys studying to be Apothecaries because of the large Chinese population.

The first Chinese boy to be admitted a Medical Apprentice was Tan Poh. He was admitted in September 1854 and placed under the Assistant Surgeon in Tan Tock Seng Hospital, then a pauper hospital mainly for the Chinese.

From 1854 to 1857, only 5 boys applied to be Apprentices. In 1857, 1 absconded and Tan Poh resigned as he could not live on the salary provided. Between 1858 and 1867, another 8 Apprentices were recruited. The Apprentice System proved an utter failure. The Senior Surgeon tried to lower entrance requirements to attract more applicants, but was reprimanded by the Governor, who rejected his suggestion. His proposal to increase the salaries, which were half those of the clerks in the mercantile offices, was ignored. Reliance was still placed on Apothecaries seconded from India or the Army serving in the Straits Settlements.

1867 was the year of the long-awaited Transfer. On 1 April 1867, the Straits Settlements were transferred from the India Office to the Colonial Office, and became a Crown Colony with its own Legislative Council, subject to control by the Secretary of State for the Colonies. This change had far-reaching and important consequences. We will here concentrate on the effects on the development of the Medical Service and medical education.

The Indian Government requested that its Apothecaries and other Subordinates be sent back as soon as their services could be dispensed with. The Governor informed the Secretary of State for the Colonies that without the services of the Indian Apothecaries, the Medical Department would at once collapse.

The Governor proposed, with the Secretary of State’s approval, to offer attractive terms to the serving Apothecaries to induce them to leave the Indian Service and join the newly created Straits Settlements Service. Not many accepted the offer.

It was then proposed that the Indian Government be asked to allow competent Apothecaries to be seconded for service in the Straits Settlements for 10 years, or to allow volunteers to join the Straits Service. This was also not very successful.

He then put forward a third suggestion that the “*Government of Madras may be moved to admit into their training Medical Colleges, a limited number of lads from the Straits as Apprentices to be trained eventually for the appointment as Apothecaries.*” This was approved by the Secretary of State, and the Governor started negotiations with the Madras Medical College for students from the Straits Settlements to be trained there.

The first 2 boys to be sent to the Madras Medical College were William Henry Dickson, aged 18 years, and Ernest Clarence Leicester, aged 17 years. This was in 1869. Young men from the Straits Settlements were thenceforth sent regularly to Madras with occasional breaks in continuity until 1904, the year before the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School (as the King Edward VII College of Medicine was known then) was founded. They, with their parents or guardians, had to sign a bond to serve the Government for 15 years, or, if at any time before this period expired, they quit the Service without the consent of Government, they or their parents or guardians would have to refund to Government the whole of the expenditure incurred on their behalf during their education.

The existing Medical Services were gradually expanding, in terms of hospitals, vaccination programmes, quarantine, etc. In addition to the existing hospitals, new ones were established, e.g., the Maternity Hospital in 1882. New services were also introduced, e.g., the Outdoor Dispensary in Singapore in 1882. Moreover, the Government also had to provide facilities required by law, like the Contagious Diseases Ordinance of 1870, which dealt with prostitution and venereal diseases. All these expansions needed plenty of manpower.

Over the years, an increasing number of boys were sent to Madras, but the exercise was stopped in 1885 as it was decided that a sufficient number had been trained and were being trained to supply the needs of the Colony. But the

demands were still there, and growing. The danger of the “over-production” of Apothecaries was exaggerated. With retirements, resignations and dismissals and not much help from India, the Government in a few years found itself acutely short of staff.

Another factor which paradoxically aggravated the staffing situation of Apothecaries was the employment of Sisters from the Convent as nurses in the General Hospital in 1885. These Sisters, who were supposed to assist the Apothecaries, gradually usurped the authority of the Apothecaries and became their superiors. The Apothecaries were humiliated and a number, including some from India, resigned. They wrote to newspapers in India urging their colleagues not to apply for jobs in the Straits Settlements. Other grievances were also aired: the high cost of living; restrictions on private practice while British doctors were allowed private practice, leaving the Apothecaries to shoulder the responsibilities in the hospitals.

Faced with the multitude of staff problems in the Medical Service, the Governor instructed the Acting Principal Civil Medical Officer (PCMO) to look into the possibility of having a Medical School in Singapore to train Apothecaries for local needs. This was one of the 3 avenues by which the shortage of staff could be alleviated. Appeals continued to be made to the Madras Government for help in recruiting Apothecaries, and in the latter half of 1889, the practice of sending young men to the Madras Medical College was restarted. (After the Straits Settlements became a Colony, the title of the Senior Surgeon was changed to Colonial Surgeon and then to Principal Civil Medical Officer.)

Dr Simon, the Acting PCMO, submitted a “Memorandum as to the foundation of a Medical School for the Straits Settlements in Singapore” on 16 September 1889. He outlined the necessary steps that would have to be taken. He also stated that a Medical School could be of two standards: (a) a school whose graduates were recognised only locally; or (b) a school whose qualifications were recognised by other examining bodies overseas. He himself preferred “a school of a higher order” and recommended accordingly. He also recommended that Scholarships and Allowances be given to medical students as he was of the opinion that few parents could afford the fees.

Dr Simon was enthusiastic and, in his opinion, the teaching material in Singapore was unlimited. The advantages for medical education in Singapore were considerable. There was no lack of subjects for anatomical teaching. The opportunities presented by the General Hospital for the study of Medicine and Surgery were very great. As regards medical cases, sailors presented with diseases not commonly seen in the East, while patients admitted from Singapore, the neighbouring countries and China had conditions more common to the region. As

regards surgical cases, there were unlimited trauma cases of all types, with ordinary surgical problems like tumours, as well as those peculiar to the East, e.g., elephantiasis.

The editor of the *Straits Times* also waxed eloquent on the subject of a Medical School in Singapore. He mentioned that this would create more opportunities for the Eurasians (most of the young men sent to the Madras Medical College in those early years were Eurasians), and possibly for the “new generation of Chinese who are making use of such educational facilities as those given in the Anglo-Chinese School” (founded in 1886, 3 years earlier).

Dr Simon’s Memorandum was laid before the Legislative Council on 9 October 1889. The Governor then invited the Council to approve the scheme for training young men for the Medical Department, and in the Estimates for 1890, \$2400 was approved for the expenses connected with the establishment of a School of Medicine for the Straits Settlements. It was proposed that the Medical School be started on 1 October 1890, initially as a “feeder” college.

The plan was for students to pass a preliminary entrance examination and undergo 2 years of instruction in Singapore (in accordance with the Madras Medical College curriculum), and after passing an examination be admitted as third-year students of the Madras College (the course was 4 years). The proposed Medical School could not be started in 1890 as no candidate managed to pass the preliminary examination.

In 1891, the PCMO was disappointed again, when only 2 candidates passed the preliminary examination. Since it was obviously impracticable to start a Medical School with only 2 pupils, these 2 boys were sent to Madras to commence their studies as first-year students (as in previous years, before the idea of a local Medical School was mooted). The plan was shelved.

One factor which could have contributed to the frustration of the plan to start a Medical School was the availability of Queen’s Scholarships. For bright boys interested in Medicine, these scholarships were prestigious and enabled them to obtain a university degree in the United Kingdom and not just an inferior Apothecary’s qualification.

Student Apothecaries continued to be sent to Madras. Salary scales for Apothecaries were periodically revised in the hopes of retaining them in the Service and to attract new recruits. On 22 December 1900, the designation of Apothecaries was changed to “Assistant Surgeon”.

The Government appointed a Commission to inquire into the system of English education in the Colony on 30 January 1902. Although not strictly within their terms of reference, the Commission took evidence on the prospects of “higher education”, e.g., Medicine and Engineering, in the Colony. For medical education, the Commission

recorded evidence from Dr DJ Galloway, immediate Past President of the Medical Association, and Dr TC Mugliston, Acting PCMO of the Straits Settlements. They were both against the idea.

The Commission submitted their report, which was laid before the Legislative Council on 6 June 1902. They regretted the opposition to starting medical education in Singapore:

“... The Commission much regret the evidence before them, as they feel the great advantage which would accrue to the Colony and the Native States by the introduction of a system of training which would produce, out of local material, men better qualified to supply the demand of Assistant Surgeons and General Practitioners among the native population and the poorer inhabitants. The introduction of this would pave the way to limiting practice to men who had attained the necessary qualifications.”

The matter was not allowed to die down. In 1904, action was taken from another quarter. On 8 September 1904, the Honourable Tan Jiak Kim, a Member of the Legislative Council and an influential member of the Chinese community, after discussions with other community leaders and on the advice of Mr WD Barnes, the Secretary for Chinese Affairs, presented a Memorial to His Excellency the Governor on behalf of the Chinese and other communities of the Colony, requesting for the establishment of a Medical School:

“Petition from Certain Inhabitants of Singapore to the Governor

Sir John Anderson, K.C.M.G.

MOST RESPECTFULLY SHEWETH THAT

1. Your petitioners desire to bring to Your Excellency’s notice the desirability of establishing and maintaining in Singapore a Medical School where residents in this Colony and the Federated Malay States may be trained so that they may be able to enter the Government service as Assistant Surgeons or practise their profession as General Practitioners.
2. The establishment of such a school was first advocated by Dr Simon, C.M.G., late Principal Civil Medical Officer, and has had considerable support in other quarters. The Commissioners appointed to inquire into the system of English education in the Colony advert to the scheme in paragraph 31 of their report of April 1902, and after pointing to the conflicting nature of the evidence upon the subject made the following statement. “The Commission much regret the evidence before them, as they feel the great advantage which will accrue to the Colony and the Native States by the

introduction of a system of training which would produce, out of local material, men better qualified to supply the demand for Assistant Surgeons and General Practitioners among the native population and the poorer inhabitants. The introduction of this would pave the way to limiting practice to men who had attained the necessary qualifications.”

3. Your petitioners are convinced that there are no insuperable difficulties in carrying out a scheme for the establishment of such a Medical School and they are much impressed by the great practical good which would result from it. A large portion of the native population are unable or unwilling either on the ground of expense or of ignorant prejudice to avail themselves of the service of European practitioners and are accordingly thrown back upon persons with little or no medical training with results very far from satisfactory.
4. The importance of a general comprehension of proper sanitary conditions and habits is of paramount importance to any country and your petitioners feel that no measure can so successfully diffuse this understanding as the provision of a proper supply of trained medical men who are in racial sympathy with those whom they attend.

YOUR PETITIONERS THEREFORE HUMBLY PRAY that Your Excellency will give this matter your earnest consideration and take steps to get a proper scheme framed for the establishment of a Medical School in Singapore.

(sd) TAN JIAK KIM & OTHERS.

Dated the 8th day of September 1904.”

This petition was discussed by the Governor and his Executive Council, and the Colonial Secretary replied to Mr Tan Jiak Kim on 4 October 1904. This is a condensation of what he wrote: The Governor entirely concurred with the views expressed by the Commission on the system of English education, but drew attention to the fact that only about 200 boys each year would be educationally qualified to apply to be medical students, and that there would be great competition for them from the business firms and Civil Service. The proposed Teachers’ Training College had not attracted any candidates although they could get an allowance of \$10 per month during training. Young men and their parents preferred present income to uncertain future prospects.

Under these circumstances, the establishment of a Medical School could only be regarded as an experiment, the success of which was too problematical for the Government to undertake without some guarantee both as to part, at least, of the expenditure involved and as to the active cooperation of the leading men of the Chinese and other

racers represented amongst the signatories of the Memorial.

With regard to the expenditure, it fell under 3 heads: buildings and equipment; staff and maintenance expenses; scholarships and maintenance allowances for students. As far as buildings were concerned, there was fortunately at the moment, owing to the removal of the female patients to Pasir Panjang, a block of the Lunatic Asylum at the disposal of Government which could be converted into suitable lecture rooms, laboratories, etc. for about \$11,000.

As regards Scholarships, the Governor felt that it was essential that they should be of sufficient amounts to attract the best boys from the schools, and he was of the opinion that each should be given \$15 a month, with annual increments of \$1 to \$18 per month in 4 years. An endowment fund of at least \$60,000 should be provided for the payment of such scholarships for students of native origin. This amount, if invested at 6%, would be sufficient for the award of 5 scholarships every year.

If the amount required for the establishment of the fund and the conversion and equipment of the buildings, about \$71,000, could be raised by subscription amongst the Chinese and other Asiatic communities in the Colony and the Federated Malay States, His Excellency would be prepared to invite the Legislative Council of the Colony and the Government of the Federated Malay States to provide the payment of the necessary staff and maintenance charges, estimated provisionally at \$13,200 per annum, and also provide scholarships for 10 students annually. There would be a Board of Trustees, an Advisory Council and a Visiting Board for the school.

If the Memorialists were prepared to accept these terms, the Governor suggested that they should communicate with the PCMO and the Secretary for Chinese Affairs, and as soon as he was informed that the funds he considered necessary were forthcoming, he would be pleased to initiate the legislative measures necessary for the establishment of the School.

On receipt of this reply to their petition, a meeting of the leading members of the Chinese community was held at the Chinese Protectorate, at which the Governor's challenge was accepted, and arrangements for the collection of the necessary subscriptions made. In 3 months, over \$80,000 was collected. Of this sum, \$20,000 had been subscribed in Penang, and \$9000 (in a single donation) in the Federated Malay States. The Singaporean-Chinese headed by the Honourable Tan Jiak Kim (who himself gave \$12,000) were by far the largest subscribers.

On 10 January 1905, the Governor wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies for permission to establish the Medical School as all his conditions had been fulfilled. In fact, subscriptions far in excess of the amount actually

required had been collected (\$87,077.08). He also mentioned that parents were reluctant to allow their sons to be sent to India for their medical education. In Singapore, they could stay at home. He was confident that there would be no shortage of students. The expenditure would not be excessive as the teaching staff would be private, or be government medical practitioners to whom an honorarium would be paid.

A telegram was sent from London on 21 January 1905 to the Governor: "*Referring to your Despatch No. 9 of the 10 January, proposals approved. LYTTLETON.*"

In 1902, the principal advisers to the government had opposed the idea of a local Medical School, but by 1904, they had been replaced by men who were more hopeful, more sympathetic and more knowledgeable, namely, Dr DK McDowell, the PCMO, and Mr WD Barnes, the Secretary for Chinese Affairs, and it was on their advice that the Governor acted in the manner he did.

By the end of 1904, there were 11 Straits students left in Madras. No more were sent after 1904. Two students remained at the end of 1908, and they returned to Singapore in 1909.

After receiving the Secretary of State's approval, the legislative machinery was set in motion. The following Gazette Notification appeared on 12 May 1905. It was re-published in the *Straits Times*:

"It is expected that the new Straits Medical School will be opened at Singapore on the 1 July. The course of study will be five years, and successful candidates will receive diplomas entitling them to practise in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States. A certain number of approved students at the School will pay no fees, will receive scholarships at the rate of \$15 per month, and will have the use of instruments and expensive books free of charge.

No student will be accepted unless his knowledge of English and general education are sufficient to enable him to profit by the instruction given. Intending students should communicate with the Secretary for Chinese Affairs, Singapore, from whom further information concerning the School can be obtained."

At the Legislative Council meeting of 16 June 1905, the Attorney-General moved a Bill entitled "*An Ordinance to provide for the Establishment of a School of Medicine at Singapore*" to be read for the first time. He said the bill was intended to remedy a most serious state of things in the Colony with regard to Medicine and Surgery. The Europeans had capable doctors to look after them, but the mass of the population, especially the Chinese, had no confidence in

European medicine. He hoped that the School would train competent doctors, who would inspire their own people to accept European medicine and treatment. It was also necessary to award diplomas and certificates, the standard of the qualifying examination in Medicine, Surgery and Midwifery, would be that set by the General Medical Council of the United Kingdom. The holders of the diplomas of the School would be entitled to register under the new Medical Registration Ordinance 1905.

Mr Tan Jiak Kim seconded the motion, which was agreed to, and the Bill was read a first time. At the Legislative Council meeting of 30 June 1905, the Attorney-General moved the second reading of the Bill. Mr Tan Jiak Kim seconded the motion and addressed the Council. He wanted assurance from the Governor that the Medical School would be a government responsibility; thanked the Governor for establishing the School, and predicted that the Medical School and its graduates would spearhead the development of higher education in the Colony:

“... Now, in the proposed Bill itself, I cannot find that there is any provision that the Government can spend the public revenue of the Colony on the maintenance of this School. I am sure that it is the intention of Your Excellency to make this institution a Government one. It is very important that an institution of this kind should be entirely under Government... I hope Your Excellency will see your way to allow certain provisions in order to make it clear that this School will be a Government institution... I do not think that Your Excellency need for one moment entertain the opinion that when this School is a Government institution that the Chinese community will not take any further interest in the welfare of the School. They are bound to take an interest as they do in the case of Tan Tock Seng Hospital... I shall simply say that the community of this Colony, as well as of the Native States, are deeply indebted to Your Excellency for the ready manner in which you met the prayer of their petition in establishing this School. The School will fill one of the most important needs of this Colony, and I am sure the community will look upon this School as a special sign for the future higher progress of education in the Colony.”

The Governor replied that there was no doubt that the School was to be a Government responsibility. The financial arrangement was for half the expenditure to be borne by the Colony and the other half by the Federated Malay States. He mentioned the appalling death rate in the Colony. Instead of the expected 4 to 5 per 1000, it was 40 per 1000. He was confident the students, when qualified, would play

a great part not only in curative medicine, but also in preventive medicine and health education of the general public. The Bill was read a second time.

The proceedings of the Legislative Council were published in full in the newspapers of Singapore and Penang, and were followed with interest by prospective students and their parents. One father wrote to the *Straits Times* on 30 June 1905 to say that there were rumours that the Singapore diploma would not be recognised outside the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, and that anxiety regarding this should be allayed, or the inducement for local boys to join the Medical School would lose its attraction.

The Medical School started its first session on 3 July 1905 (Figs. 1 to 3), eleven days before the Bill establishing it became law! The School was housed in the old Lunatic Asylum premises for women at Sepoy Lines. The buildings there had been adapted for the purposes of the School by the Public Works Department, and consisted of a dissecting room, a lecture room, a classroom and an office.

At the Legislative Council meetings of 7 July 1905 and 14 July 1905, the Council went into committee to consider the Medical School Bill. A number of amendments were proposed and accepted, including one which changed the name of the School from “Straits Medical School” to “Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School” in view of the fact that the Federated Malay States Government would be paying half the maintenance costs. The Bill was read a third time, passed and became Ordinance XV of 1905.

The official opening of the Medical School was postponed to Thursday 28 September 1905. By this time, most of the equipment ordered from Britain had arrived and it was possible to show the School more or less in working order.

The Opening Ceremony was at 3 pm. Awaiting the arrival of His Excellency the Governor, Sir John Anderson, was a large and representative company of leading residents, students, those interested in the founding of the School and the School staff, whilst the medical profession had assembled in force.

After a speech of welcome by the PCMO, Dr DW McDowell, CMG, President of the School Council, Dr GD Freer, the Principal of the School, read a short report on the workings of the School to date. He said, among other things, that doubts had been expressed that the School would not be able to get a sufficient number of students. There should be no more misgivings. Twenty-two students had been enrolled in the present session, and he had already received many applications for the following year’s course. The progress of the students had been good, most of them receiving high marks in the examinations.

The Honourable Tan Jiak Kim traced briefly the events leading to the founding of the Medical School before calling on His Excellency to declare the School open.

The Governor in his speech said that credit for his decision to agree to the founding of the School had to go to Mr Barnes and Dr McDowell, who had advised him. He next praised Mr Tan Jiak Kim and the medical profession:

“... But I must mention my friend, Mr Tan Jiak Kim, in this connection. It is not only the munificent gift (\$12,000) which he gave personally but also the enthusiasm and energy which he threw into the work to enlist the sympathy and find his way into the pockets of his fellow Chinese that it is largely, almost entirely due to him, that we see the institution started, and started in such very hopeful circumstances... The medical profession... giving their services as honorary lecturers...”

His Excellency then specially addressed the students. He told them that study in the Medical School was not just intended to enable them to earn a living. It was also a passport to membership of a great and noble profession. He expected them not only to cure diseases but also to prevent them and help educate their less fortunate and ignorant compatriots in health matters, and he emphasised:

“You are of the East and to you we look, to break down the walls of native prejudice and overcome this ignorance. You have access as the Westerner has not, to the inmost households of the East, and it is a very real battle that will have to be fought, and I think, with the training you will acquire here, you will go forth well-equipped and determined to win in the real spirit of the profession. And in a few years’ time you will overcome them and the community will reap the benefit of an increasing healthy population, a diminishing death rate and improved conditions of life everywhere...”

He concluded by declaring with much pleasure the School open.

This article will end with quotations from the euphoric first Annual Report of the Medical School by its Principal, Dr GD Freer, and a postscript by the Colonial Secretary:

“... The buildings in the whole female Lunatic Asylum were altered and equipped for the purpose of a Medical School, and have so far proved sufficient for present requirements. The situation is excellent, as it is quite close to the General Hospital where the students will later carry out some of their hospital work. It is also free from noise and dirt. If, however, as it now seems likely, the number of students goes on increasing, it will be necessary to construct new buildings or enlarge

the present ones. All classes are held there with the exception of those in Chemistry, which are held by the Government Analyst in the temporary laboratories in Coleman Street. New laboratories are about to be built for the Government Analyst, and the advisability of having them in the Medical School premises ought to be considered. At the present time, the students have to walk nearly 2 miles to their Chemistry class...

In addition to the regular course of instruction for the Diploma which extends over five years, and after a qualifying examination in Medicine, Surgery and Midwifery, entitles those who pass to be recognised locally as general medical practitioners, the School is undertaking important work in other directions.

During August and September last, the School staff prepared and examined in Medicine, Surgery and Midwifery, those unqualified practitioners who under the new Medical Registration Ordinance would otherwise have been inadmissible to the Register...

Running a 2-year course for Hospital Assistants...

The preparation and examination of candidates for the Licence under the Morphine and Poisons Ordinances are being carried out under the auspices of the Medical School.

Classes in Elementary Hygiene and Sanitation are shortly to be held for the benefit of school teachers.

A number of applications have been received to join the School next session, both for the full course for the Diploma and for the Hospital Assistants Department. For the former, a compulsory preliminary examination is to be held and it is intended as soon as possible to have the same standard for the preliminary examination as that required by the Regulations of the General Medical Council of Great Britain.” (The School produced its first graduates in 1910 and its Diploma was recognised by the GMC in 1916.)

The Colonial Secretary acknowledged the prominent part played by the Chinese in the establishment of an institution which has become an internationally recognised Medical School:

“The Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School was established during the year and made a very successful start. The School is endowed by a fund raised almost entirely by subscriptions from Chinese of the Colony and the Federated Malay States, who responded liberally to the appeal made to them...”



The name of the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School was changed to King Edward VII Medical School in 1913 (Ordinance XII of 1913), and then to King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1921 (Ordinance XXXIX of 1921).

Note: I would like to refer readers who wish to know more about medical education in the Straits Settlements (1786 to 1871), and the founding of the Medical School in Singapore in 1905, to my earlier articles in the *Annals of the Academy of Medicine*<sup>1,2</sup> and the *Singapore Medical Journal*.<sup>3,4</sup>

#### REFERENCES

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2. Lee YK. Medical education in the Straits (1786-1871) (Part II). *Ann Acad Med Singapore* 1974;3:167-74.
3. Lee YK. The founding of the medical school in Singapore (Part I). *Singapore Med J* 1980;21:544-55.
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Fig. 1. The logo of the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Figs. 2 and 3. The Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School was inaugurated on 3rd July 1905. The First Principal was Dr Gerald Dudley Freer (ex-colonial Surgeon Resident of Penang). Dr Freer relinquished his position on 3rd February 1909 (when he was appointed Senior Medical Officer, Selangor). The medical students presented Dr Freer a farewell scroll contained in a beautiful silver scroll holder (Fig. 2). The whereabouts of the scroll is unknown. The silver scroll holder is cylindrical, 13½ inches long with a diameter of 3¾ inches. It was made in Canton, China and is beautifully chased with magpies among prune blossoms. The inscription on the silver scroll holder reads:

"To / Dr G.D. Freer / From / The Students / Medical School / Singapore (Fig. 3)"  
(collection of Dr Cheah Jin Seng)