

## **The History of Medicine in Malaysia – The Foundation Years**

By Muzaffar Desmond Tate Abdullah (1934-2004) and Completed by Khoo Kay Kim & Selvamany Gabriel

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This book is the culmination of a decade of planning and research. Muzaffar Desmond Tate started writing the book but he died before it could be completed. The book was finished by Khoo Kay Kim and Selvamany Gabriel. It was published in 2005; 2005 was the centenary of medical education in Singapore and Malaysia. The medical school started on 3rd July 1905 in Singapore as the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School. In 1905 The Straits Settlements consisted of Singapore, Penang and Malacca and the Federated and Unfederated Malay States were part of Malaya. Hence, the centenary of medical education in Singapore is also the centenary of medical education in Malaysia.

The book has 11 chapters: The Folk Medicine of Malaysia; Malay Medicine and the Islamic Tradition; Medicine in Malaysia in the 19th Century: The Outsiders; On the Threshold: Health and Medicine at the Turn of the Century; Coping with the Epidemics; The Conquest of Beri-Beri; Foundations for the Future; The King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore; Public Health: The Inter-Depression Years; Public Services in the late 1930s and Epilogue: The Close of an Era.

The book begins with the folk medicine and spiritual healers of the indigenous people of the country before progressing to the traditional healing faith and medicine of the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The British colonial masters introduced western medicine and healthcare to Malaya and Singapore from the founding of Penang by Francis Light in 1786 to the founding of Singapore by Stamford Raffles in 1819. The greater availability of writings and literature after the late 19th and early 20th centuries means that three-quarters of the book deals with the Malaysian healthcare between 1900 and 1940. The infectious epidemics, beri-beri, development of hospitals and public health system were covered at some depth.

The chapter on “The King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore” is brief; the endnotes are nearly as long as the text. In Chapter 3 (“Medicine in Malaysia in the 19th Century: The Outsiders”), western medicine as introduced by the British was described as “The Outsiders”; this is an unfortunate choice of words as it implies that western medicine is not main stream medicine. Perhaps the authors were thinking of western medicine as exogenous being introduced by the British colonisers!

Although the Institute for Medical Research, Kuala Lumpur (founded in 1900) was referred to in more than a chapter, it deserves a separate chapter. Its achievements in medical research are very impressive, besides those described in the book (smallpox, cholera, plague, beri-beri, malaria etc). It also pioneered research in such areas as filariasis, typhoid etc. The Institute of Medical Research had published its achievements in several books marking its various milestones.

A glaring omission from the book is the health problems arising from opium addiction in British Malaya and Singapore. The British turned a blind eye to the evils of opium as opium sales gave the government substantial revenues up to the Japanese invasion in 1941. Dr Wu Lien Teh (in Malaya) and Dr Chen Su Lan (in Singapore) were among the local doctors that campaigned against the evils of opium addiction. The book also did not mention the racist colonial attitude of the British; local doctors were considered inferior to the British; local doctors were ranked below and paid less than the European doctors!

The subject matter of this book is not easy to write comprehensively in 120 pages. The authors and the Academy of Medicine of Malaysia can be proud of this book.

It is easy to criticise but difficult to write. It is a pity that there is no index. The endnotes and references are intermingled and in some instances they are longer than the text. The book has few illustrations.

This is a book that all those interested in the medical history of Malaysia, Malaya, Singapore and the Straits Settlements should read and keep in their library for reference.

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