

Gwee Ah Leng (1920-2006)

I have known Dr Gwee Ah Leng since 1949. We did our housemanship together but he was a few months senior to me. I completed my internship in Medical Unit 2 where he had just joined the Government Medical Service, Singapore as a Medical Officer and began his medical career then. Medical Unit 2 was under the charge of Prof E S Monteiro, with Dr Khoo Oon Teck and Dr Ho Yuen being part of the excellent team of physicians. Dr Gwee was most helpful to me in that posting.

This was the start of a very illustrious and well-respected career as a physician. He was a sound clinician, and his special interest was in neurology in which he excelled, and became a vocal promoter of research in brain disease. He was later appointed Head of Medical Unit 3 when it was formed in the expansion of Medical Faculty in Singapore General Hospital until he retired in 1971 from Government Medical Service and went into private practice. During his term in the service, he earned the respect of all the medical students who came under him, and many of them have become very prominent physicians or surgeons in the field of their various chosen specialties, doubtless influenced largely by his own compassionate approach.

He had a strong interest in education, particularly medical education. In 1959, he was in a government-appointed committee to review the Prescott Report, in which an expatriate professor was rather critical of the quality of education in the Nanyang University and the influence of communist activities among its students. Following that, he was with a committee that drafted the constitution of the University of Singapore. For all this public service and contributions to medicine and education in Singapore, he was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal (PJG) in 1967 by the Government of Singapore.

Not only was he concerned with medical education, he was involved in medical politics right from the early years of his career. He was driven by a profound sense of right and wrong and also a sense of civic responsibility which was no doubt fuelled by the change from colonialism to self-government and finally, to the independence of Singapore. He was an active member of the British Medical Association (Singapore Branch) and later the Singapore Medical Association (SMA) when Singapore became independent and served as its President from 1972 to 1973. In 1990, he was made an Honorary Member of the SMA. He was concerned with the debate on legalised abortion (he



Past Master, Academy of Medicine, Singapore 1961-1964

was against it), euthanasia, and matters of professional secrecy and medical ethics, and the principle of good medical practice. He had strong views and was very principled, always firmly and steadfastly standing by his beliefs.

I sat with him on several of the committees of the SMA and the Academy of Medicine, and while he patiently listened to the views of others, he always displayed a characteristically bemused expression and a quizzical smile if you had a difference of opinion with him. This always seemed to make you lose confidence, and sit back and wonder if your remarks were indeed in order. He was not always right but I think that on occasion, he would deliberately be provocative to start a friendly debate and to get other views on the subject under discussion. He was a founder member of the Academy of Medicine in 1957 and became its first Singaporean Master from 1961 to 1964. Dr Gwee Ah Leng was also instrumental in getting our First Head of State, President Yusof Ishak, to present the Coat of Arms to the Academy at the Medical Centre in 1963.

The civic duty and responsibility and beliefs he had made him a very active member of the Telok Ayer Methodist Church, St John Ambulance Brigade, Chinese Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), later known as the Metropolitan YMCA, where he was President. It was in the field of the YMCA movement that I became even more closely associated with Ah Leng. The YMCA movement in

Singapore owes him a great debt in being largely responsible in restoring the goodwill and cordial relationship between the YMCA of Singapore and the Metropolitan YMCA, which had been drifting apart. The two associations decided to form a National Council of YMCA of Singapore in 1970 to further practical integration of policies and programmes, and Ah Leng became its founder President until he retired in 1991 when I took over.

Dr Gwee Ah Leng was an excellent doctor, a Christian gentleman, an accomplished scholar, and a wonderful and exemplary citizen of Singapore. God rest his soul.

Robert CK Loh *MBBS, DO, FRCSE, FRACS, FRANZCO, FRCP&S, FRCOphth, FAMS, FACS*

Past Master, Academy of Medicine, Singapore, 1975-1978

Eye Centre & Surgery
Gleneagles Medical Centre
6 Napier Road, #05-04/05
Singapore 258499

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