

## **Dr Tham Cheok Fai: “Father” of Neurosurgery (8 October 1925 – 4 December 2013)\***

### **How His Legacy Began**

Although not the first neurosurgeon in Singapore, Dr Tham is acknowledged as the “father” of Singapore neurosurgery. Dr Tham was already a Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon at “C” Orthopaedic Unit, Singapore General Hospital (SGH), with a special interest in spinal surgery when Dr Tseng Yuen Lin, the first fully trained neurosurgeon in Singapore, passed away.

In 1962, he was sent by the Ministry of Health to train in neurosurgery under Dr Murray Falconer at Guy’s, Maudsley and King’s College Hospitals in London. He returned in 1965 to start a section in Neurosurgery at the Department of Surgery under Dr Choo Jim Eng at the Thomson Road Hospital, with only Tuesdays to do his operations.

I was posted to Thomson Road Hospital in 1972 as a houseman. Each month, one houseman would be posted to the Surgery Suite to assist consultants during operations. When my turn came on the first Tuesday, I asked Dr Tham whether I could assist him. He happily agreed.

Dr Tham was meticulous in his operations. In those days, neurosurgery was carried out on the same day following imaging with ventriculograms or cerebral angiogram. With the patient intubated under general anaesthesia, a burr-hole was made and about 20 ml of air was introduced into the lateral ventricle. We would then accompany the still-anaesthetised patient to the Radiology Suite. There, we had to lift and turn the unconscious patient over one full turn to make the air flow into the other ventricles before taking X-rays. Using the primitive equipment available then, routine operations sometimes lasted more than 12 hours. One needed patience and a strong mental and physical constitution to do neurosurgery.

In 1973, the Department of Neurosurgery and Neurology was set up at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) as recommended by the Committee on Medical Specialisation. Dr Tham was to head the Department of Neurosurgery until his retirement. To train more neurosurgeons, he reached an agreement with Dr John Lekias and Dr Bryant Stokes of the Neurosurgery Services in Perth, Western Australia to

send trainees there to train under the Neurosurgery Training Programme of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.

### **The Patient Always Comes First**

Dr Tham had a fearsome reputation as a strict disciplinarian. This was only because he cared so much for his patients. He insisted on “doing things right the first time, all the time”. He taught his doctors by example the basic requirements of surgery: Firstly, to have good clinician skills before becoming good surgeons; secondly to develop good surgical habits, and last but not least, to be humanistic and ethical. Many doctors, including myself, were inspired by him to train in neurosurgery.

Dr Tham was dedicated to his patients and would often spend more than an hour taking the history, examination and consent for operation, patiently explaining the procedure and answering all the patient’s questions. All these would be carefully documented in the case records with his beautiful cursive writing.

### **Valuable Foresight**

At a time when Singapore doctors were looking toward Britain for their surgical training, Dr Tham was one of the first to realise the need to learn from North America. Between 1974 and 1976, he arranged with the Foundation for International Education in Neurosurgical Surgery for 12 neurosurgeons from the US and one from Canada to serve in Singapore on rotation, providing consultancy service and training young neurosurgeons. This was the start of our collaboration with North American neurosurgeons. With doctors training in both Australia and North America, the number of trained neurosurgeons in the department gradually increased.

The first dedicated Brain CT Scan in Singapore at TTSH in 1977 was also Dr Tham’s initiative. It was then the most expensive radiological equipment in Singapore, and indeed the only in the region! This was the start of the modern era of neuro-imaging in Singapore.

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For his excellent work, Dr Tham was awarded the Public Administration Medal (Gold). He was also honoured by the Australasian College of Surgeons and the American Association of Neurological Surgeons for his achievements.

Since those early days, the Department of Neurosurgery has grown in size and achievements, and is now acknowledged as one of the finest in the region. All these are due to him in no small measure. In the words of Isaac Newton: “If we have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Dr Tham Cheok Fai has passed away and we all mourn his loss, but his legacy lives on in the department he has built up.

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