

## Dr Tan Ngoh Chuan (1931 – 2015)

Dr Tan Ngoh Chuan (NC Tan) is a pioneer who contributed greatly to the development of cardiothoracic surgery in Singapore. He was born on July 7, 1931 in Penang, Malaysia and obtained his MBB degree from the University of Malaya in Singapore in 1955. He was awarded a Senior Colombo Plan Fellowship in Surgery and was based in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia from 1959 to 1961.

He was a consultant and head of the Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery at the Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) from 1965 to 1980 and senior consultant and head of cardiothoracic surgery at the Singapore General Hospital from 1981 to 1988. In 1967, he began a programme in open cardiac surgery at TTSH.

A gifted scholar, Dr Tan was the recipient of several academic awards including the Soon Eng Kong Scholarship (Merit) in 1948, Soon Eng Kong Gold Medalist (1948), the Senior Colombo Plan Fellowship (1959 – 1961), the World Health Organization (WHO) Travelling Fellowship in Cardiothoracic Surgery (1977) and a Health Manpower Development Programme (HMDP) Fellowship for Coronary Artery Bypass Surgery (1982).

Dr Tan was awarded a Public Administration Medal (Gold) by the Government of Singapore in 1977. He played a very active role in professional organisations in his field, and held, at various points in his career, the offices of:

Master, Academy of Medicine, Singapore	1987 – 1990;
Chairman, Chapter of Surgeon	1976 – 1978;
Editor-in-Chief, Annals	1975 – 1989;
President of the Cardiac Society, Singapore	1975 – 1976, 1978 – 1979.

He was also the Past President of the Association of Cardiothoracic Surgeon of Asia and the ASEAN Federation of Cardiology.

Due to his contributions, he is regarded as the doyen of cardiothoracic surgery in Singapore and his efforts have spawned subsequent generations of cardiothoracic surgeons in Singapore.



Unlike most cardiothoracic surgeons, Dr NC Tan is a very gentle person (and a gentleman) known for his meticulous surgical work and his small, numerous, verbal “thank you” acknowledgements to his assistants who helped him throughout the whole operative procedure. At the end of each operation, which could be 6 hours or longer, he would close the pericardium (the covering of the heart) as meticulously as he could, like with a needle doing a ‘Chinese Darning’. It was revealed to us, later on in a re-operation, a proper closure of that kind will protect the heart well from the sternal saw during the repeat cutting of the sternum. If this was an old case of Dr NC Tan, we would be reassured the pericardium is securely closed and the repeat sawing of the sternum would be safe.

He would always type his operative notes at the end of each operation with his portable typewriter, which he fished out from his bag that he carried all the time. We would always hear the tit-tat, tit-tat in the background while arranging for the patient to be transferred to the intensive care unit (ICU) bed from the operating table.

Nowadays, for electronic medical records and clarity purposes, we are encouraged to type our operative note on the computer in the operating theatre. He was ahead of his time.

When I was under his tutelage as a young surgeon in training, he took me through my first open aortic valve replacement. I would always remember it because during my HMDP fellowship in New York University (NYU) Medical Centre, New York, I was tested on my surgical ability and I was able to impress my attending surgeon with my aortic valve replacement. He had thought that I was doing it for the first time. I kept quiet about it but deep down in my heart I remembered NC and was emotionally touched by him. It was a good omen and the rest of the fellowship was smooth sailing from then on.

Dr NC Tan was also a family man who had 2 lovely daughters and 2 autistic sons. They received solid support from him and his wife, Dr Dixie Tan. They were a good team and shared the same values. In spite of already having 4 children, he supported his wife in taking her MMed exam, her voluntary work and founding of the

Association of Educationally Subnormal Children, as well as her career in politics and service for the nation. On weekends, he spent time with his family on outings to MacRitchie Reservoir, Botanic Gardens, Mount Faber, as well as playing tennis. These simple get-togethers are fondly remembered by their children. They also sung in the church choir together. When his daughters were in the later stages of their adult lives, he supported them wholeheartedly in their career choices and was proud of their achievements. Likewise, the children are equally proud of their parents.

Dr NC Tan will always be respected, admired and remembered as a friend, colleague and teacher in our heart and as one of us.

**James Wong**

**Chapter of Cardiothoracic Surgery, Singapore**

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