

The Medical Alumni Story

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Abstract

The Medical Alumni is unique in being the oldest alumni association with medical, dental and pharmacy graduates from our seminal medical school, that has now evolved into the faculties of medicine in 2 countries, namely Malaysia and Singapore. Founded in 1923, the medical alumni association has undergone several name changes with its evolution and activism. After the Japanese Occupation, it was given its present name in 1947, comprising 3 branches working under a common Constitution operating in 2 separate countries. It is also unique in being the only association recognised by the Registrar of Societies with membership in 2 countries. Following the development of medical professional and academic bodies, the medical alumni wound down its medico-political activities to concentrate on providing social and mutual support for its members and its alma mater.

Ann Acad Med Singapore 2005;34:190C-195C

Key words: Alumni Association, Faculties of Medicine, King Edward VII College of Medicine, Universities of Malaya and Singapore

Our Story Begins Here

The story of our Alumni Association properly begins with the now historic foundation of its medical school in 1905. The story of this first medical school, then known as the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School and its successor institutions, is also the story of the establishment of tertiary education in our country and its rich heritage. This commemorative publication is a tribute to the success of the school, which is now the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur and the National University of Singapore in Singapore.

Although the first batch of 7 medical doctors graduated from the original Medical School in 1910, it was not until 1921 that the first attempt to form a corporate medical body was made. A Graduates' Association was founded with Dr EW de Cruz as president but it floundered and became defunct after 2 years. It was only in 1923 that another corporate body was established to represent the interests and welfare of the medical graduates.

Thus, the Singapore Medical College Graduates' Association was inaugurated on 5 September 1923 by a group of graduates of the King Edward VII College of Medicine at a meeting in the Victoria Memorial Hall in Singapore. It was managed by a general committee of 12, representing the Straits Settlements and the Malay States, with Dr Chen Su Lan (who was also a founder member of

the original association) elected as its first president. Dr Chen had returned from a visit to the USA, where the significant role the alumni played in the community had left a deep impression on him.¹

Name Change

Dr Chen Su Lan held the office of the first president for more than a decade from 1923 to 1934, during which the name of the association was changed to the Alumni Association of King Edward VII College of Medicine on 27 December 1930.

Following the establishment of the University of Malaya, the name was changed again in 1952 to the Alumni Association of King Edward VII College of Medicine and Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya, to include graduates of the Medical Faculty.

The dental graduates joined the Alumni Association following the establishment of the Dental School at the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1929. The pharmacy graduates of the School of Pharmacy, which was started in 1935, also joined and supported the Alumni Association. Thus was forged the intimate bond among the medical, dental and pharmacy graduates who form the membership of the Association.

Motto and Logo

The phrase "Not to be ministered unto, but to minister"

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(*Mark 10:45*) was proposed by Dr Benjamin Chew and Dr LS da Silva and subsequently adopted as the Alumni's motto (with the consent of the first President Dr Chen Su Lan). The Association adopted as its crest the emblem design composed of the *caduceus* intertwined with 2 serpents.

But it is not just “motto and logo” that the Alumni Association is made of. Our story is about people, those students and graduate personalities – our alumni – whose motivation and activism, thence, now and hence, have helped to define the course of medicine that has been taught and practised for nearly 100 years. More so, tertiary education and medical teaching in particular, now and for the future, as we embark upon the next 100 years.

The Early Years

In the early years, the activities were restricted because the alumni of the College were scattered all over Malaya, while the Association was centred in Singapore. In conjunction with the undergraduates, an annual reunion was held in Singapore from 1933 to 1941 (when war broke out); this included various games and ended with an annual dinner. Thus, a tradition was started that was to continue till today with the addition of more activities.

Among the early activities of the Alumni Association was the fight for the proper recognition of local graduates in the government service. Local nurses were also treated unequally compared with the British nursing sisters. The Alumni Association continued to agitate for better working conditions and study leave for its members, and the situation improved but was still far from satisfactory when World War II broke out.

The Japanese Occupation and Post-War Times

It was during the Japanese Occupation that the local people came into their own. The Europeans were all interned and for the first time local medical graduates were responsible for the welfare of the people and answerable to them. Given the chance to take charge of affairs, they showed their capabilities.

Having proved that the local medical, dental and pharmacy graduates were not inferior to their expatriate counterparts, the Alumni Association pressed for a unified medical service where local graduates would be accorded the same status, salaries and opportunities for postgraduate study as the expatriates.¹

Another issue the Association took up was to get the government to agree to set up a university. Dr Chen Su Lan, the Association's president for many years, spearheaded the attack against the Government's apathy and reluctance to move in this direction.

Professional Activities

Having achieved full professional recognition and having successfully pressed for the establishment of a university, the Alumni Association intensified its professional activities by holding regular clinical meetings and talks on medical subjects which were started during the Occupation and continued when the British returned.

For the benefit of those who could not attend these meetings, and as a permanent record of the medical conditions encountered in this part of the world, the quarterly *Proceedings of the Alumni Association* was published from 1948.

Formation of the Three Branches

A new constitution of the Alumni Association to unite all the graduates of King Edward VII College of Medicine into one body had been drafted as early as 1941. However, owing to the outbreak of the Pacific War, the General Meeting convened for December 1941 to approve the Constitution never took place. The 3 branches of the Alumni Association, however, have been in existence since 1941 – the Northern Branch comprising Penang, Province Wellesley, Perak, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu; the Central Branch comprising Selangor, Pahang, Negri Sembilan and Malacca; and the Southern Branch Singapore, Johore, Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei.²

After the approval of the Constitution at the General Meeting on 12 January 1947, a Council, which would be the executive committee for the whole Association, came into existence. For a while, the Committee of the Southern Branch (which was the forerunner of the other branches) had been mainly responsible for carrying out the functions of the Council, with frequent consultations with the other 2 branches. The Council, which comprises representatives from the 3 branches (their Branch Chairman and Honorary Secretary), meets yearly under the new Constitution. A Council President is nominated from the branches for election during its AGM, where its Honorary Secretary and Treasurer are also elected. The Alumni Editor was later co-opted into the Council.

On this draft Constitution in 1946, Dr Chen Su Lan was elected first President of Council, with Dr Loh Poon Lip as President-Elect. The inaugural (1946) chairmen of the Northern, Central, and Southern Branches were: Drs LS Abraham, MA Gabriel and PT Nathan, respectively; with Chairmen-Elect: Drs S Cassim, GH Oorloff, and BR Sreenivasan respectively (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

The Medical Centre

Soon after the War, the Association set about looking for its own premises where members could meet for social and recreational purposes. A building sub-committee was

appointed in 1948, with Dato Dr CG Paglar as chairman. The many alumni who gave support and donations included Drs Chen Su Lan, Benjamin Chew, BR Sreenivasan, Tan Eng Han, AC Sinha, N Mootatamby, BH Sheares, Tay Teck Eng and V Thambipillai (treasurer).

Initially, it was largely a Singaporean enterprise, but subsequently Drs Chee Phui Hung, JJ Murugasu and AA Sandosham made trips up-country to persuade alumni members scattered all over the Peninsula to contribute generously to the Building Fund, which they did.³

In 1952, its application to the Government for the lease of a site within the General Hospital grounds to build the clubhouse was approved. In April 1954, the foundation stone of the Association's building – known as the Medical Centre – was laid by Dr WJ Vickers, then the DMS. The Medical Centre was completed and officially opened on 10 October 1955, during the Golden Jubilee of the Medical Education Week, which was a significant milestone for our Association, commemorating the 50th year of the founding of our original medical school (Figs. 4 and 5).

Dr Chee Phui Hung has continued his interest and with his characteristic driving force, has been largely responsible for the later considerable expansion of the premises and the additions to the amenities of the Alumni Medical Centre, with its swimming pool, games room, extra boarding rooms for outstation members, and a billiard table donated by Dr Mahathir (in Kedah) and Dr Tow Siang Yew (from Penang). Subsequently, he managed to get Dr Chen Su Lan to donate his own billiard table as well when the latter moved out of his residence at St Thomas Walk.

Changing Roles

With the approach of independence, the growing strength of local medical graduates and the expansion of medical services, the British Medical Association, with considerable foresight, wound up its Malaya Branch, its place being taken by the Malayan Medical Association and the Singapore Medical Association.

The Alumni Association handed over its professional and medico-political activities to these bodies and retained for itself the social and recreational function as an “old boys” club, and organised very successful yearly get-togethers or reunions in different parts of the country. In the 1980s, through the outstanding efforts of Dr Chan Beng Keat, many reunions were held in Perth. The latest gathering, held in June 2004, was attended by Tun Dr Mahathir and Tun Dr Hasnah, and was presided over by the Alumni President Tan Sri Dr Abdul Majid Ismail “Coco”.

Revival of the Medical Centre

After the official opening in 1955, the Medical Centre was used mainly for business meetings of the Alumni,

although some social functions were held. But overall, it was underused and not well maintained, so much so that there was a proposal by the Medical Dean Dr TJ Danaraj in the early 1960s to transfer the building to the University as KE Hall was short of space.

It was the admonition of Prof K Shanmugaratnam, and the suggestion by Dr Seah Cheng Siang that the building could be developed for use by all the fraternal organisations and to be a medical centre in the fullest sense, that started Dr Chee Phui Hung on the revival of the Medical Centre.

Following the renovation of the Medical Centre, the resurgent Alumni's rallying call to its members was overwhelmingly answered. Unlike previous reunions, which were just business-like annual general meetings, the reunion initiated by Dr Wong Poh Lam in 1963 in Penang was a fun-filled informal night with an entertaining show. This became an annual event members and their families looked forward to.

The New Medical Centre

In 1985, the Land Office gave notice that the Medical Centre was to be demolished to make way for the Central Expressway. The search for new premises was ultimately successful when Dr Kwa Soon Bee, then Permanent Secretary for Health and Director of Medical Services, helped to get the old Department of Scientific Services building. The building was handed over to the Alumni on 3 August 1988. After extensive renovations, the imposing and prestigious building's restoration was completed and occupied in December 1989 (Fig. 6).

The first reunion at the new Medical Centre was held soon after, in the same month. It was graced by Dr and Mrs (Dr) Mahathir. The new Medical Centre was officially opened by Dr Kwa Soon Bee⁴ on 21 July 1990 (Fig. 7).

Alumni Publications

A quarterly journal, the *Proceedings of the Alumni Association*, was first published in 1948 (Vol. 1) to record its early scientific meetings but ceased publication in 1959 (Vol. 12) with the formation of the Malaysian and Singapore Medical Associations, which published their official professional journals. It was replaced by the popular *Alumni Association Newsletter*, which was originally started by Chee Phui Hung. This appeared 2 or 3 times a year and was later carried on under the enthusiastic leadership of Drs Brian La Brooy, Winston Moreira and Mohamed Kadir. The Newsletter became a unifying force between reunions and was a valuable storehouse of Alumni activities over the years, featuring reports of annual reunions, correspondence, citations of its Gold Medallists and Honorary Members, photographs, anecdotes, reminiscences and other materials of archival interest. Its current editor is Dr William Chew

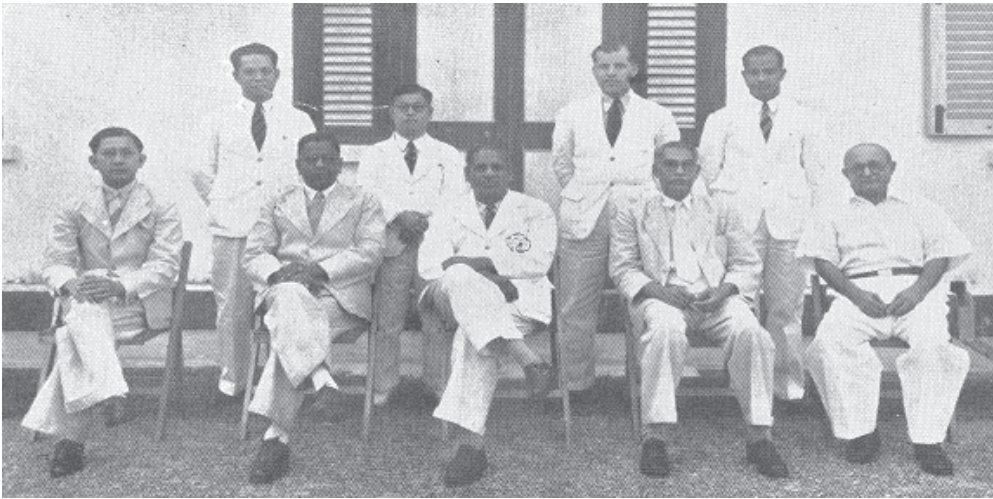


Fig. 1. The Committee of the Northern Branch, Alumni Association, 1947.

Seated (L to R): Mr Ong Kee Yeam, Dr VK Thambipillai, Dr IS Abraham (Chairman and Council Representative), Dr S Cassim (Chairman-Elect), Dr H Mehta.

Standing (L to R): Dr Chan Hoy Chan, Dr Tan Hor Kee (Branch Treasurer), Dr AW Moreira, Mr M Subramaniam (Branch Secretary and Council Representative).



Fig. 2. The Committee of the Central Branch, Alumni Association, 1947.

Seated (L to R): Dr JS Goonting, Dr JA Chelliah (Branch Secretary and Council Representative), Dr MA Gabriel, JP (Chairman and Council Representative), Dr GH Oorloof (Chairman-Elect), Dr ESR Alfred (Branch Treasurer).

Standing (L to R): Dr K Kanagasingam (Pahang), Dr SG Rajahram, Che Ibrahim bin Haji Md Yassim (Dental).



Fig. 3. The Committee of the Southern Branch and Council Members, 1947.

Seated (L to R): Dr BR Sreenivasan (Branch Chairman-Elect of Council Secretary), Dr (Mrs) TJ Danaraj, Dr Chen Su Lan (President of Council), Dr Loh Poon Lip (President-Elect of Council), Dr PT Nathan (Branch Chairman and Council Representative), Dr N Mootatamby (Council Member and Alumni Association Nominee on College Council).

Standing (L to R): Dr V Thambipillai (Branch Treasurer), Dr BJ Ess, Dr WA Balhatchet, Dr AA Sandosham (Branch Secretary and Council Representative) Mr Tay Teck Eng and Mr Poon Wei Leng.

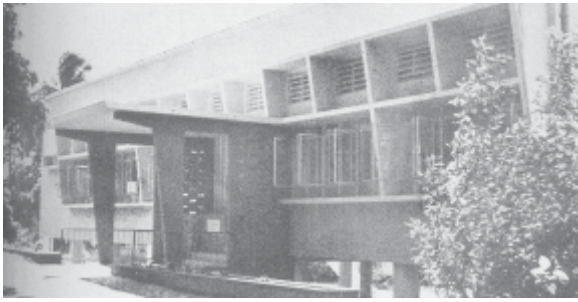


Fig. 4. The original Medical Centre.

Built at a cost of nearly \$100,000, the Headquarters of the Alumni Association is the realisation of the dream of 2 generations of graduates. The foundation stone was laid by the DMS, Dr WJ Vickers on 3 April 1954.

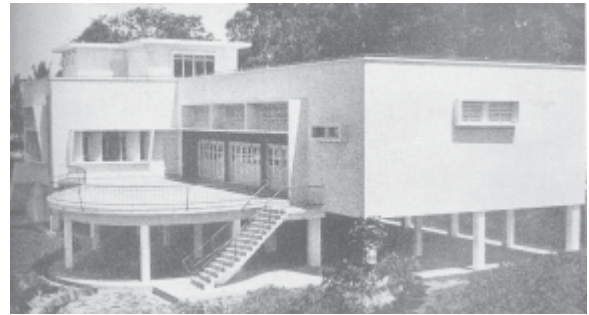


Fig. 5. Rear view of the original Medical Centre.

A new floor was added in 1960 to the Centre. This contains 2 rooms, a lounge and recreation room. A swimming pool was constructed on the open grounds.



Fig. 6. The new Alumni Association Medical Centre.

The new Centre, housed in the refurbished old Department of Scientific Services in the General Hospital grounds, was opened by the DMS, Dr Kwa Soon Bee on 21 July 1990.



Fig. 7. Opening of the new Alumni Medical Centre.

Loy Soon. *The Annual Reports and Finances* are published as separate volumes.

On the 75th Anniversary (1923 to 1998) of the Alumni Association, the Alumni Affairs and Development Office of NUS (now the Office of Alumni Relations, NUS) published a *Commemorative Issue of AlumNus, NUS, 1998*, edited by Dr Wong Sze Tai. This commemorative magazine inspired a definite volume, entitled *75 Years of Our Alumni: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, edited by Dr Lim Kuang Hui, which was published in 2000 by Singapore University Press for the Alumni Association and the Alumni Affairs and Development Office, NUS.

Expanded Activities and Recent Functions

In response to a suggestion by former Minister for Health, BG George Yeo, that the Alumni should be more involved in collective community-based social work, the Association raised \$345,826 for 3 charitable organisations and a further \$46,000 for St Luke's Hospital in Singapore.

In response to Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong's call to strengthen the Alumni of the National University of Singapore, the Association rallied its members to express

their sentiment of giving back to their alma mater by contributing to the University's Endowment Fund.

Professor Arthur Lim, who was appointed Chairman of the Endowment Fund, immediately collected \$400,538 at our 69th Anniversary Alumni Reunion dinner. Of this, a sum of \$238,188 was used to endow a surgery chair in the name of Dr Yeoh Ghim Seng. And in conjunction with its 75th Anniversary, the Association launched the Rotating Professorship Endowment Fund, raising \$1,080,000 to seed this Fellowship Fund.

In recent years, the Alumni has stepped up activities to promote closer, more systemic and regular liaison with the medical, dental and pharmacy undergraduates from their first year in the University until they graduate. This is carried out in the form of various activities such as Orientation Week, the White Coat Ceremony, the Graduation Tea Party, the Dr Chan Ah Kow Prize, and the NUS Medical Society Excellence Awards. All these are intended to instill in the undergraduates the significance and relevance of the Association in their undergraduate, and subsequent professional and social life.

A Young Alumni Chapter was started in 1998, followed later by a Women's Section, as a subsection of the executive committee in the Southern Branch to attract younger members, who organise additional social programmes, among others, to cater to the younger generation.

As part of our programme to strengthen our external relationships and facilitate the exchange of views, the Association holds special lunch meetings with the ministers for health, permanent secretaries, vice-chancellors and deans, in an informal atmosphere of cordiality and easy dialogue.

The Association also promotes close and friendly relationships with the Ministry of Health and all the medical institutions and hospitals (in the university, public, private sectors) through informal social activities such as the Annual Inter-Hospital Karaoke Contest or the Kwa Soon Bee Challenge Cup.

The Alumni Association has always been a very vibrant, caring and dynamic organisation. It has among its members those who have become archbishop, cabinet ministers, head of the Civil Service, director of Medical Services, current Vice-Chancellors of the University, deans, distinguished academicians, clinicians, successful businessmen and sportsmen. They have made significant contributions to the nation, the welfare of the community and the medical, dental and pharmaceutical professions.

Later Relationships between Malaysia and Singapore Medical Graduates

With the establishment of a second medical school in the University of Malaya in 1962, following the autonomous division of the parent university, a new Constitution⁵ and name change came about, the Association now styling itself “*the Alumni Association of the King Edward VII College of Medicine and the Faculties of Medicine, Universities of Malaya and Singapore*”. The Association had the objective of keeping together all the alumni of the 2 national universities which shared a common ancestry dating back to the founding of the original medical school in 1905.

Professor AA Sandosham, an alumni stalwart who had been Alumni Association President in 1953 and 1976 and was then acting Vice-Chancellor of both autonomous branches, appealed to and urged all the new medical graduands to join the Alumni Association, to the extent of opening our membership to other medical schools to be established in the future in Malaysia. Many of the graduates of the second medical school did join and some, such as Drs Yeoh Poh Hong and Kee Wei Heong, later distinguished themselves as Alumni Gold Medallists. But many did not and in 1973, 4 years after the first batch of medical students had graduated, a new University of Malaya Medical Alumni Association (UMMAA) was formed. With this split, both associations, sadly, experienced unhealthy dwindling new membership numbers.

With the coming Centenary of our seminal Medical School and the celebration of the establishment of tertiary education in our countries by both universities, it is hoped that the graduates at the Kuala Lumpur campus will recognise the long-established traditions and rich heritage of the Alumni Association that is rightly theirs as well.

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