

In Memoriam: Emeritus Professor Wong Hock Boon

On 28 December 2008, the medical profession in Singapore mourned the loss of one of their most prominent paediatricians, Wong Hock Boon, who is also known as the father of paediatrics in Singapore.

Emeritus Professor Wong was born on 25 March 1923. He graduated from the former University of Malaya in Singapore in 1952. He was offered the Founder Chair of Paediatrics in 1962 by the University of Singapore, and in 1965 was appointed Founder Director of the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies (now the Division of Graduate Medical Studies, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine). He headed the Department of Paediatrics from 1962 until his retirement in 1988. He played a seminal role in training the present generation of paediatricians in Singapore. Internationally, he was well recognised as an outstanding paediatrician. In 1980, he was awarded the Guinness Award for Scientific Achievement, and in 1985 the “most outstanding paediatrician in Asia” award from APPSEAR (Association of Paediatric Societies of the South East Asian Region).

Fondly known as “Mr Breastfeeding”, he campaigned vigorously to tackle childhood malnutrition and infantile diarrhoeal diseases, through the promotion of breastfeeding, aiming to improve the health status of children in the region. The use of rice-water for oral rehydration in the management of acute gastroenteritis was pioneered by him, and this led to a new and highly cost-effective approach to diarrhoeal diseases in the developing world.

The greatest contribution of Professor Wong in the medical profession was training and mentoring of a whole generation of paediatricians for Singapore. Many of his trainees have been or are currently in leadership positions in Singapore, and in many South East Asian countries. His foresight and dedication had a profound influence in the specialty of paediatrics. In large part, the excellent state of child health in Singapore would not have been attained if it had not been for Professor Wong’s efforts. No single person in the history of Singapore Medicine has had such a profound influence in paediatrics as he.

As Director of the School of Postgraduate Medical Studies, he had the foresight to set up the annual Master of Medicine Course, during which he invited 4 or 5 eminent overseas experts to teach us, before the final Master of Medicine degree examination. These valuable teaching courses gave us early exposure to the best of medicine in the Western world, and an opportunity to establish our professional network for



subspecialty training.

Emeritus Professor Wong was an astute clinician. His vast experience and excellent clinical acumen is legendary. He has been fondly described as “specialist in all paediatric specialties” or “a walking paediatric encyclopedia”. He showed a legendary devotion to the daily grand ward-round starting from 7.30 am, every day in the year, to solving clinical problems for all patients (regardless of social class), to the weekly clinical conferences for postgraduate students, and to the weekly professorial tutorials for undergraduates. Solving clinical problems for all patients was his self-imposed responsibility. Immediately after the round he would record the difficult problems. The

next moment he would be in the medical library checking in the Index Medicus for the latest advances. All these monumental efforts of self learning and teaching culminated in 52 volumes of the *Paediatric Clinical Conference Notes*. Many cohorts of Master of Medicine students and many overseas students from the surrounding countries fed on this predigested staple diet to grow.

Professor Wong’s achievement in research ran into hundreds of scientific papers published in prestigious medical journals. His interest included many areas in child health, medical education and paediatric research. His pioneering work on glucose 6 phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) deficiency in newborns resulted in a significant reduction in the incidence of kernicterus in Singapore and in the region. His scientific achievements included the discovery of 3 previously unknown hemoglobinopathies, which were aptly named *Hb Singapore*, *Hb J Singapore*, and *Hb J Meerut*. He delivered the first Haridas Memorial lecture in 1966, entitled “Haemoglobinopathies in Singapore”. In 1987 he won the inaugural National Science and Technology Award from the National Science and Technology Board (now the Agency for Science, Technology and Research) of the Government of Singapore.

Even in retirement, Professor Wong contributed to childcare and paediatric education by his generous donation of S\$1.5 million as endowment for a Professorship in Paediatrics at the National University of Singapore. He passed away at his home after a period of illness. He is survived by his beloved wife, Lily, and his daughter Julia and son-in-law Tom.

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