

Alexandre Chao,^{FAMS}

(17 July 1965 – 22 April 2003)

On 22 April 2003, a brilliant star was eclipsed on earth. But somewhere in Heaven, a new beacon of light begun to shine forth for all eternity.

Dr Alex Chao left us, being the first surgeon to succumb to “SARS” in the course of his dedicated duty. He fell in the course of his service to humanity and to medicine.

Alex Chao was born on 17th July 1965. He was the only child of Prof Chao Tzee Cheng (Singapore’s pioneer forensic pathologist and Mdm Wong Yoke Cheng a teacher). He had his primary schooling at ACS and his secondary and college education at Raffles. Even while in school, he had shown great leadership – being the primary school head prefect and a college councillor. In 1989, he graduated with MBBS as the top student in surgery from the University of Singapore.

Alex joined the Department of Surgery, Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) in 1989 as an enthusiastic young house surgeon. He had shown great promise and soon became a surgical trainee. He served loyally in the Singapore Armed Forces after housemanship and resumed his surgical training at TTSH after national service. With dedicated commitment and diligence, he sailed through his fellowship examination and did excellently well, obtaining both Fellowships of the Royal Colleges of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Even as a young trainee, he began showing great promise as a clinician and a research worker, winning a Young Investigator Award in 1995 on gene mutation and liver cancer.

Alex went on to complete his advanced surgical training. Seeing the need and the challenge of a relatively young discipline in vascular surgery, he put his heart and soul totally into this specialty. From 1997 to 1999, Alex spent several years in sharpening his skill and enhancing his knowledge. On a fellowship to Australia (HMDP), he worked under a renowned vascular surgeon, Prof Reginald Lord in Sydney and many other outstanding surgeons like Dr John Anderson, Dr Michael Lawrence-Brown, Dr Kevin Hanel, Dr John Crozier and Prof John Fletcher, among others.

In 1998, Alex was admitted as a Fellow of our Academy of Medicine, Singapore. At the induction ceremony, he delivered an excellent speech entitled “Hippocrates in the Next Millennium—Resurrecting the Dying Art of Apprenticeship”, in which he extolled the art of medicine and reminded us the need for teaching and training and continued medical education.

Alex continued his career in the service of vascular surgery. In 2002, he held the title of ‘Director of Vascular Surgery, National Healthcare Group (The Heart Institute); Head, Vascular Unit, TTSH and Visiting Consultant at the National University Hospital (NUH), among many others.

In late 2002, Alex moved over to Singapore General Hospital (SGH) to begin a new challenge in the development of vascular surgery in Singapore.

Throughout his career, Alex was a totally committed surgeon, a distinguished mentor to trainees and students and an excellent friend to colleagues and patients.

Despite his busy schedule of working over 12 hours a day, he astounded everybody by producing about 60 scientific papers and book chapters. He had membership in international organisations and held numerous overseas appointments at different times of his career. These included lecturer in surgery, Faculty of Medicine, Sydney (1999) and the latest being Visiting Professor at the Department of Surgery, University of Southern California, USA. His research has won him more than 8 awards, many of which were of international significance.

Despite his busy schedule, Alex found time to serve God as a lay leader in the Salvation Army and was Chairman of the Advisory Committee of Peacehaven, a nursing home as well as a member of the School Advisory to the management committee of Nan Hwa Primary School.

Alex’s excellence is best summed up by the tributes that were showered upon him, among them are:

“He sacrificed his life to protect our nation caring for SARS patients, we should not let his sacrifices be in vain”

Dr Ng Eng Hen,
Acting Minister for Manpower and
Minister-of-State for Education, Singapore (The Straits Times, 26 April 2003)

“In your brief moment here on earth, you have attained your status as a recognised authority in vascular surgery. One of the finest we know, both locally and internationally, you are respected and sought after. The Department of Surgery of Singapore General Hospital and Tan Tock Seng Hospital and all doctors are truly proud of you”

Drs Soo Khee Chee, Chia Sing Joo, Low Cheng Hock,
Chee Yam Cheng, Tan Ser Kiat, Chew Chin Hin
and staff of General Surgery, SGH and TTSH

*“You are our dear colleague, our kind and gentle friend
By your compassion and selflessness, you have inspired us all
True to your calling, in the prime of your life you have made the final sacrifice
And have followed most closely the footsteps of the Supreme Physician
Your time with us is a warm glow within our souls
And we will always miss you”*

Department of General Surgery, SGH

“He exemplified the modern and complete vascular surgeon and his loss to Singapore and the vascular community is prodigious. Alex Chao was a man of great character with outstanding leadership qualities. He projected vision, clear direction and strong personal example and was widely admired for his steadfastness, humanity and resolute conviction”

Professor Reginald S A Lord, Chair, Surgical Professorial Unit,
The University of New South Wales

“At a professional level, Alex was such a significant world figure and showed such incredible enthusiasm and leadership in Singapore”

Professor John P Harris, University of Sydney

“Dr Alex Chao was a very caring person and would go out of his way to help others. He had a great respect particularly for the elderly. He served as Chairman of our Peacehaven Nursing Home Advisory Committee, was highly respected in the medical fraternity and was at the forefront in the field of vascular surgery”

Commissioner Lim Ah Ang, The Salvation Army

As Alex left us to begin to light up the Heaven for eternity, he has enriched the lives of all who has come to know him. His passing is a great loss to our medical fraternity.

We wished him a smooth and peaceful journey into eternity, and into the comforting arms of God – *adios, goodbye fare thee well, our friend* –

From all colleagues at General Surgery Departments, SGH, TTSH and NUH where he spent most of his life in studying, in-service, research and teaching.