

Tribute to a Physician – Chan Heng Leong

(6 February 1941 – 26 May 2003)

Professor Chan Heng Leong (1941-2003), former Head of the Department of Medicine at the National University Hospital (NUH), obtained his MBBS (Singapore) in 1965 and his MRACP (Australia) in 1969.

Since then until 1998, he had been awarded a total of 10 postgraduate degrees which included several fellowships from prestigious universities from the UK and USA. From 1969 to 1972, he was a lecturer in Medicine at the University of Malaya. In 1973, he joined the University of Singapore as a lecturer, was appointed Associate Professor in 1977 and by 1984 was Professor of Medicine. He obtained his Diploma in Dermatology in 1973 from the University of London which launched his subspecialty career as a Consultant in Dermatology. He soon became the doyen of Dermatology in Singapore.

From 1983 to 1985, he served as Head at the University Department of Medicine, Singapore General Hospital (SGH) and thereafter when the University moved to Kent Ridge he continued to head the Department at the National University Hospital. Throughout his medical career, he had served on numerous professional bodies at both national and international levels. These included chairmanship of the NUH Committee on Bioethics, Committee for Medical Ethics, Board of Examiners in Internal Medicine and Dermatology, Faculty Examination Review Committee and Specialist Training Committee in Dermatology.

Heng Leong had also served as Council Member of the Singapore Medical Council as well as its Complaints Committee. He was also Past President of the Dermatological Society of Singapore. He had authored more than 100 peer-reviewed scientific publications, written 3 textbooks on Dermatology and delivered 83 postgraduate lectures at various scientific conferences locally and internationally. He was also appointed undergraduate as well as postgraduate examiner for not only local and regional universities but also various prestigious universities in many parts of the world. In 2003, Professor Chan was appointed Emeritus Consultant to the National Skin Centre in recognition of his many contributions to Dermatology both locally and overseas.

Professor Chan Heng Leong died from liver cancer on 26 May 2003 after suffering for 7 months. He left behind his wife, Dr Ong Beang Khoon, and his 2 sons – 23-year-old Ih-Ming, a biomedical engineering student, and 21-year-old Chung-Ming, a medical student. He bore his illness with great courage and fortitude. To quote Beang Khoon, “*On the Sunday before he died, he sat me down by the bed and said, the end was here and that I should take good care of myself and not to worry.*” She said, unable to hold back her tears, “*He was so brave, right to the very end.*”

After his death numerous tributes poured into the Straits Times from the medical fraternity which covered several pages of the Straits Times over a couple of days.

Among the tributes: *An inspirational Mentor, Physician and Teacher who lives on in the hearts and minds of his many students, colleagues and friends.*

The oft repeated words were “*Teacher, Mentor, Friend*”.

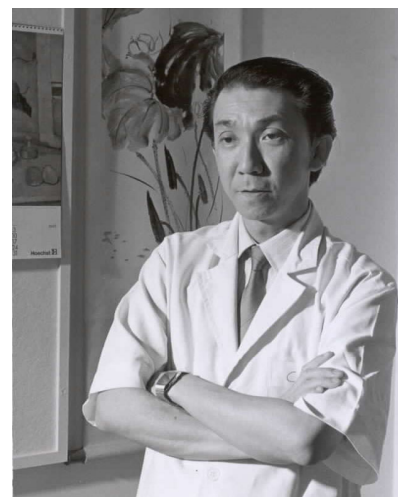
His medical class of 1965 wrote:

*Forty-three years from whence we met
Memories we shared we'll never forget
May you find eternal rest
Where God has planned for his very best.*

His Department of Medicine colleagues wrote:

*Dear Friend and Colleague
Who taught us by example
How to live with humility and honour
And in his passing, dignity.*

Professor Benjamin Ong and Staff



In response to all the tributes the family wrote :

*Ephemeral, our lives next to eternity.
So too was my father's passing through.
But coincidence will not suffice,
For the crossing of his path with you.
It was the generosity of your hearts
From which sprung forth his cause, his drive.
Through the autumn years he walked
It shone as a blessing in his life.
The shoulders lent as you bid farewell
Have come to bless our pathways too.
And now, we offer in return
Our simple, yet deepest gratitude.*

Beang Khoon, Ih-Ming, Chung-Ming

My friendship with Heng Leong dated back to 1975 when I joined SGH at the Department of Renal Medicine. Even though I was in Renal Medicine I had always felt I was part of Medical Unit II, and Heng Leong and I did several dermato-renal projects together and I learnt from him. However, what I learnt most was the impeccable manner in which he always conducted himself as a physician and a teacher.

Heng Leong had always been held in the highest esteem among his colleagues, peers and students and in my mind he was the epitome of a “physician par excellence,” the last of a breed nurtured in the heritage and tradition of our great teacher and master Professor Gordon Arthur Ransome.

Heng Leong had led a very fulfilling life. In every sense of the word, he had led his life in the tradition of William Osler whom Prof Ransome much admired. Heng Leong had been a good doctor and a good man of high moral standing, whose reputation had been beyond reproach. He had been a great asset to his Institution and the medical profession. He had been to the UK and USA more than 10 times each, examined and lectured in many colleges of prestige including a stint at Harvard where the watchword was “Veritas” or “Truth”.

Among the many things Heng Leong and I discussed were Truth and Beauty. We spoke about Keats: Truth is Beauty and Beauty Truth, the Co-equal Trinity: “*Thou was not born for death, immortal bird. No hungry generations tread thee down*”. – from Ode to Immortality. Keats was suffering from consumption and he was using opium.

Heng Leong had told me that he was a philosophical man and embraced the concept of God and therefore believed in the afterlife. We do not simply die and fade away. We leave the empty shell of our spent body and move on to another realm. I told Heng Leong that from my reading, even though we are in different realms we can still see, feel and be in contact with our loved ones. It is possible for those who have left us to do so but very difficult for those who are left behind to reciprocate as we are at a lower realm.

Heng Leong and I had shared various thoughts. I told him that though I am a Catholic, I also embrace the philosophy of Buddhism. I have found it very helpful as it teaches one to be resigned and accept. Even as I sat and spoke to him I could feel his pain, in spite of the mixt morphine. I admired his courage. Heng Leong had always been a man of equanimity and courage. When in conversation over serious matters, he would pause with his characteristic frown, forehead and brows knitted, more prominent because of his bushy slightly greying eyebrows, deep in thought and after careful analysis would let you have his considered opinion on a matter. More often than not I realised subsequently that his viewpoint was correct.

Heng Leong had informed me that his wife Beang Khoon is strong and she has God beside her and his two sons are doing well. I told him that he had been a good husband and father. I reminded him of his wedding speech where he shared with us the virtues of his wife. We were all very touched and happy for him. I thanked Heng Leong for the kindness he had shown me and most importantly his integrity and life's lessons we had all learnt from him as a mentor and a teacher. Later I sent Heng Leong a Sanskrit poem and a valediction from William Osler and told him that in many ways he was like Osler.

At the time of this writing, it has been more than 3 weeks since Heng Leong's passing. I sat in my office recollecting the last few times we spent together. I had visited Heng Leong about 5 times since 30 October 2002 at his office in NUH. We would share sandwiches, his favourite was ham sandwich on white bread. He would have a cup of Chinese tea which the secretary would prepare for him in his Chinese tea mug. I would have a coke from the 20 cents vending machine outside his office. We knew – even as we sat and talked about old times, the memories we shared in the Medical Unit II days, the

photographs we reviewed on his computer, putting names to familiar and non-familiar faces, house officers, medical officers, other staff and colleagues. We shared little anecdotes, some solemn and even the more hilarious ones, tutorials with Prof Ransome, Prof Khoo Oon Teik – that it would only be a matter of time, probably 6 months, give and take another month or two, when we would not be seeing each other anymore.

On the 21 November 2002, he sent me an email informing me that he had watched the movie “What Dreams May Come” on Channel “i” with Beang Khoon and he had described it as thought provoking and revealing. He had signed off as: Your mentor, colleague and friend.

For a while Heng Leong seemed to be responding to thalidomide and the liver enzymes were improving. We were all heartened by the good news and secretly I harbored the thought of seeing him around for another year.

Christmas came and we wished each other “A Blessed Christmas”. This was followed soon by Chinese New Year. We had our sandwich lunch before New Year and exchanged greetings. I saw him again after New Year and told him to eat the 2 Mandarin oranges on his desk as he was on diuretics for oedema. He was getting better, so said many people who saw him. The MBBS examination came and I saw him once more before Easter and we exchanged Easter Greetings. That was when we shared our last sandwich lunch – the last time I saw him alive.

The SARS outbreak came and I wrote to him on 14th April 2003 at 4.33 pm:

Dear Heng Leong,

How are you getting on? I heard that you were not doing too well as you had a change of medication. About 2 weeks ago I had wanted to drop by to see you but was told you were indisposed. We have been very tied up with the SARS problem. Also I thought I would not like to see you and expose you to it since SGH is not SARS free. Do let me know how you are doing. If I could be of any assistance please let me know.

Warmest Regards,
Keng Thye

Heng Leong replied on 15th April 2003 at 11.45 am:

Dear Keng Thye,

I guess you must be pretty busy with the SARS outbreak at SGH. Everyone in Singapore is affected in some way or other, the effects of which are still being played out. Let’s hope it will not get any worse than it already is. As for myself, no dramatic change with Iressa. But the alpha-foeto-protein seems to be plateauing. Let’s hope it holds. Meanwhile trying to maintain my nutrition and strength.

With Best Regards and Happy Easter!
Heng Leong

Heng Leong passed away on 26 May 2003. On 29 May, at 2.30 pm when they wheeled his casket into Crystal Room at the Singapore Casket I saw him again (after such a long time) together with Beang Khoon and their 2 sons. He appeared peaceful and dignified and had lost much weight. I spoke to Beang Khoon about our lunch meetings and she nodded her head and through her tears told me that Heng Leong had been updating her and that they had both watched the movie, “What Dreams May Come” by Richard Matheson. I also wrote my thoughts on Heng Leong in the Condolence Book, met Heng Leong’s brother, spoke to Heng Leong’s sons – Ih-Ming and Chung-Ming – and other family members as well as his dermatology proteges, Dr Fong Poh Huat and Dr Tham Siew Nee.

Two days later, on Friday 30 May 2003 I attended Heng Leong’s funeral service where I saw him for the last time. I told Beang Khoon I had to write some more in the Condolence Book. This time I wrote a poem. I sat with Heng Leong’s medical classmate and good friend Professor Foo Keong Tatt together with the family during the short service. It was poignant and dignified and the pastor spoke some good words.

Heng Leong is the epitome of the Physician, a Physician par excellence trained in the tradition of Prof Ransome. He had taught and inspired generations of students and is much loved and respected as a Teacher, Mentor and Friend. Above all these, he had been a good man, led a virtuous life and had been a good husband and father. He had indeed led a full and meaningful life following his vocation as a doctor and had accomplished all he had set out to do. He had travelled to many parts of the world, learnt and taught at the same time and, most importantly, left a deep and lasting impression on all those

he had been in contact with. The numerous tributes and accolades at his passing are testimony of the high regard and respect we all have for Heng Leong. He is among the last of a breed of gentleman doctors and as one of his patients told me, “*When Prof Chan walks, he is so gentle that you cannot even hear his footsteps. He is such a gentle man, a truly caring and dedicated physician.*” It was no wonder that Prof Ransome considered Heng Leong one of his best disciples and when he left office he gave Heng Leong his tendon tapper with the red rubber head and the rattan handle (which Heng Leong had since donated to the SGH museum). Gratias.

In closing, I would like to mention:

Heng Leong, you told me if you could write your own Epitaph you will only write one word “physician”. For you, Heng Leong, this is most apt and evident to all who know you, your family, your friends, your students and those who have taught you and passed their skills to you. Heng Leong, you were not only a physician. You had been a good and great Physician. I end with this poem which I wrote in the Condolence Book:

Smoke Etchings

*Yesterday this time, we sat at length
Analysed, dissected, polished ink stones
Bared the sinews of our thoughts
Between the bristles of the brush
And grains of rice paper.*

*Alone today, a cup of tea
Me, the table, an empty chair
Facing the ghost of your eyes
The quiet painting carves itself
Deep within a lone landscape
Sending you smoke etchings
Seven shades of Chinese black
Embers from a warm pipe.*

With much affection,
Your good friend
Keng Thye