

The Early Years of Otolaryngology in Singapore – 1946 to 1977

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It was the late Dr BM Johns, a general surgeon, a New Zealander and Head of Surgical Unit “B” Singapore General Hospital (SGH), who first practised simple Ear, Nose and Throat in addition to his general surgical practice after World War II (1941-1945). After his internment as a prisoner of war by the Japanese military in Singapore, he went on leave to the United Kingdom (UK) and observed the workings of Otolaryngology there, also in its infancy. He returned to Singapore to resume his duties as Head and surgeon of Surgical Unit “B”, SGH, a government-funded department. Incidentally, the Head and surgeon of Surgical Unit “A” was Professor JK Monro, an English general surgeon, appointed by the King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore.

Dr Johns practised on Alsatian dogs, especially endoscopic techniques, before he treated patients (personal communication with the late Drs Au Kee Hock and K Vellasamy)

Drs Au Kee Hock and K Vellasamy were assistants to Dr Johns, the former was more focused on Ear, Nose and Throat and the latter more on general surgery. Later on Dr SN Kapur from the British Indian Army joined the department.

To prepare for self-government, the British Administration introduced Malayanisation i.e. to prepare senior local government officers to take over from the British eventually. Singapore was then part of Malaya as the Malay Peninsula and Singapore were then called. The British Army under General Templer and others were battling the communist uprising under Chin Ping for years and failed to eradicate them but could only contained them to the mountains and jungles of the Malay Peninsula. To win the hearts and minds of the civil population of Malaya, to gain support for the war against the communist and to nullify the communist’s claim that they were fighting for the people for independence against British rule, the British Government promised the people of Malaya self-government. Hence, Malayanisation was born. Dr Au Kee Hock was selected to study Otolaryngology in Melbourne, Australia. He was then more than 50 years old with a wife

and 2 children. He went for his studies in Australia in 1949 and returned in 1951 without the degree in Otolaryngology. How could he study at that age with family responsibilities added to him? At that age he had forgotten his Basic Science – Anatomy, Physiology, Bacteriology and Pathology – and his clinical experience was not enough and there was no one to advise him on what to study. Dr Johns retired in late 1950 just prior to Dr Au’s return to Singapore.

In 1951, Dr Au Kee Hock started a separate Department of Otolaryngology, SGH in the unused old operating theatre of Surgical Unit “B”. Only part of the theatre was used and a curtain was used to screen it off from the rest of the theatre. In the portion that was used as the department, there were a wooden table; 3 chairs for 2 doctors and a senior staff, nurse Khoo; an instrument cupboard; an old operating table; an ENT lamp; and 2 chairs, one for the doctor and the other for the patient to be examined during outpatient sessions. The attendant was Inche Karim who had to multitask, such as to prepare the theatre for operation, send patients from the wards to the theatre and vice versa and hold the Tonsil Gag for Dr Au during tonsillectomy under general anaesthesia and sterilising instruments. The same place was used as an office, an operating theatre and as an outpatient clinic after screening off the operating table. The patients would queue up outside the old theatre. The Otolaryngology Department was allowed a few beds in the first, second and third class Surgical Unit “B” wards under K Vellasamy. Dr John Fozdar an Indian doctor from Bombay joined the department in 1952. In 1953, Dr Seow Li Jin joined the department as the existing staff could not cope with the increasing number of patients. Drs Chia Ah Kwan and RA Mallal joined the department when Dr Fozdar left for Kuching, Sarawak in 1954.

In a typical day, Dr Au would arrive at 7.30 am sharp and he would operate under local anaesthesia cases such as tonsillectomy, submucous resection of the nasal septum and dilatation of the oesophagus for stricture after ingestion of caustic soda for attempted suicide. When the anaesthetist arrived between 8.30 am and 9 am, Dr Au would do his general anaesthetic cases especially on children. When he

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Fig. 1. Part of staff of ENT Department in the Stanley Block (circa 1959).
Seated from left to right: Dr Lai, Staff Nurse, Dr LJ Seow, Sister Ang Lay Hwa, Staff Nurse



Fig. 2. Christmas party of the ENT Department (circa 1959).
Seated from left to right: Dr LJ Seow (holding child), Sister Rodrigues, Dr K Vellasamy general surgeon "B" Ward and Sister Ang Lay Hwa



Fig. 3. ENT Department in Stanley Block (circa 1960).
Sisters and nurses of operating theatre and ward.



Fig. 4. ENT Department (circa 1958).
Standing from left to right: Sister Khoo (1st), Dr Chia Ah Kwan (2nd), Dr Au Kee Hock (3rd), Dr K Vellasamy (4th), Dr Choo Jim Eng (5th), Dr LJ Seow (8th), Dr KL Lam (9th)
Seated from left to right: Sister Ang (1st), Mrs KH Au (2nd), Dr (Mrs) Mallal (6th), Dr Rashid Mallal (7th)



Fig. 5. In the doctor's outpatient clinic at the Stanley Block.
Sister Noordin (standing) and Dr LJ Seow (seated)

had finished, the doctors would operate on their own cases. Dr Au would leave for lunch at 11.30 am sharp and returned to the department at 12.30 pm to do outpatient clinic until 3 pm when he would leave for home. The doctors would go for lunch between 1 pm and 1.30 pm and would return to do outpatient at 2 pm and carry on until 5 pm. In between

seeing patients, the doctors would adjourn to the wards nearby to follow-up on other patients. In 1955, Dr Seow left for the UK for postgraduate studies.

In 1957, the department shifted to the newly refurbished Stanley Block, SGH next to the Dental Block. The ground floor consisted of rooms for outpatient a separate room for Dr Au without air conditioning, an Endoscopy room, an Audiology room, a Sterilisation and Autoclave room, Records Office and a clerks's room. The first floor had 2 operating theatres and beds for third class patients. The second floor had rooms for first and second class patients and a room for doctors to practise on the Mastoid bone. Altogether there were 60 beds. Dr Au was the physician-in-charge.

At optimum condition, the department had 1 consultant, 1 to 2 senior doctors, and 7 medical officers; but on many occasions, our medical officers were called to man the newly built outpatient clinics. Sometimes the department

was left with 2 to 3 medical officers and a few months later newly recruited medical officers would be sent as replacement. It was very difficult to train any doctor well in that climate of uncertainty.

In 1958, Dr K L Lam joined the department and Dr Seow returned from the UK and rejoined the department.

In late 1958, Dr Au Kee Hock resigned to enter private practice. Dr Seow Li Jin took charge of the department. He did his postgraduate studies at the Institute of Laryngology and Otology at Gray's Inn Road, London under Professor Ormerod and at the Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh, Scotland under Dr Simpson Hall.

The Department of Otolaryngology, SGH was the first in the region to have the Zeiss Operating microscope. The department carried out the latest clinical and operative techniques for Ear and Head and Neck surgery and Maxillofacial surgery. In 1959, Drs Adela Teo, Lai Kwok Onn and Tan Jui Meng joined the department. In 1960, Dr KL Lam resigned and Dr Mallal left for the UK for postgraduate studies. New medical officers were recruited: Drs N Kunaratnam, SS Yuen and Chee Chong Seng in 1960; Drs Siteo Kok Kwan and Yeoh Kian Hian in 1961. Two Japanese doctors, Drs Kikuchi and Hayasaki, also joined the department in the same year as Registrars but

they had to content with language barrier, lack of stamina in our climate and lack of practical experience in Otolaryngology as they had no opportunity for clinical work in Japan.

In 1962, Dr Teoh Choo Keng joined the department followed by Drs VC Thomas and Bernadette Chan. In July 1963, Mr Jerry Goh who was in general surgery was transferred from Surgical Unit "B" to join us.

In 1964, Dr Seow resigned and the Ministry of Health appointed Dr SN Kapur to be acting Head as well as Medical Superintendent of SGH. Meanwhile, several doctors were sent to the UK and Australia for postgraduate studies in Otolaryngology.

In 1977, the Otolaryngology Department in Stanley Block was transferred temporarily to the new SGH in Block 3 and then in 1979 to the present site in Block 6 Level 6.

Dr Seow Li Jin was in charge of the Department of Otolaryngology from 1958 to 1964. He was also the lecturer-in-charge of Otolaryngology, University of Malaya, and later University of Singapore from 1958 to 1967. He was also Honorary Consultant, Ministry of Health, Singapore from 1964 to 1995.