

Development of Rheumatology in Singapore

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Patients with rheumatic diseases frequently consult primary care physicians, internists and orthopaedic surgeons. In the past, few doctors took interest in these diseases. However, from 1960 onwards knowledge about immunology expanded rapidly. The increasing knowledge about autoantibodies, laboratory analyses and radiological advances contributed to the diagnosis and prognosis of patients with rheumatic diseases. Rheumatology as a specialty gained recognition in many countries.

The Department of Medicine IV in Tan Tock Seng Hospital took a special interest in patients with rheumatic disorders. In the 1980s, these patients were managed within the context of a general medical unit. This small beginning was followed by a bold decision for specialist training in the United Kingdom for the first trainee in rheumatology. This was followed sequentially by other doctors who were placed under the tutelage of renowned rheumatologists in the United Kingdom, United States of America and Canada. In 1993, the Autoimmune Research Laboratory was formally established with a grant from the Singapore Totalisator Board. Nurse practitioners in rheumatology joined the team in 1994.

Paediatric patients with rheumatic diseases were initially managed by adult rheumatologists. In 1996, the first paediatrician was sent for training in the United Kingdom. This addition to the rheumatology team and the development of paediatric rheumatology consolidates the infrastructure for delivery of care to all patients with rheumatic disorders.

Rheumatology as a specialty does not and cannot exist solely on its own. A multidisciplinary approach in management is a hallmark of the specialty, and colleagues from medicine and surgery work closely together with the rheumatologists. Networks with the international rheumatology community were greatly strengthened when Singapore became the venue for the Second International Conference on Systemic Lupus Erythematosus in 1989 and the XIX International League against Rheumatic Diseases (ILAR) Congress of Rheumatology in June 1997.

The Department looks set to become a centre of training for rheumatology trainees in the ASEAN region. In 1996 it served as a model for the creation of a rheumatic unit in Bangladesh. The offer of accredited and excellent training is extended to our colleagues from surrounding countries. In addition, an increasing number of patients from Southeast Asian countries also sought medical expertise from the Department.

In a short space of 13 years, rheumatology developed steadily and strongly. Its strength lies in a team of dedicated professionals who persevered in the face of difficulties and who were committed to the calling to deliver total patient care to all with rheumatic diseases. Plans in research include an on-going, prospective database entry of clinical data, epidemiological studies on rheumatic diseases, registries of diseases, and molecular biology studies.

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