

Dr Wong Heck Sing (1923-2007)

Dr Wong Heck Sing will be remembered by many for his services to the Public Service Commission; by the family physicians in Singapore for his contribution in setting up the College of General Practitioners, Singapore (now known as the College of Family Physicians, Singapore); and by his patients for being the caring family doctor.

Dr Wong was born in 1923, the sixth child and second son of a family of 9 children. His parents came from the Fuzhou Province of China, where his father, a Christian lay catechist, was the Principal of a school for the blind. His parents like many of his father's generation left China to seek a better life for their children in Nanyang, a new world of opportunity.

Dr Wong was educated at St Andrew's School. He passed his "O Level" Cambridge Examination in 1939 with distinctions, but had to wait 7 years before entering medical school in 1946. Many would have given up along the way, but not Dr Wong. With persistence, perseverance and determination, he weathered the uncertainties, obstacles and hardships of the war years to achieve his ambition of becoming a doctor.

Before entering medical school, he was teaching English in a Chinese school for 6 months, did pharmacy for 1 year at the British Dispensary, having been sent there by the Department of Pharmacy, King Edward VII College of Medicine, where he was a student. However, Pharmacy was not stimulating enough, and he applied to Raffles College to read Science. In December 1941, his studies were interrupted by the Second World War. During the war (1942-1945), Dr Wong became a farmer on Batam Island, planting and subsisting on sweet potatoes and tapioca.

In Batam, he was practising Medicine even before graduating as a doctor, for he was treating war casualties with the knowledge and training that he had received from the Medical Auxiliary Services (MAS) when the war began. Dr Wong was a self-made man. When the war ended in 1945, he had the opportunity to operate a canteen for the Dutch prisoners of war (POWs), and saved enough money to pay for most of the school fees for his medical education. Nevertheless, he had to take a loan to complete his final year of study.

Fortunately for all of us he has written down some of his struggles, his vision and aspirations. His legacies to posterity are: his stories of his Batam years which he put together into a book¹ that ran through 2 editions, the first Sreenivasan Oration in 1978 titled *The Future Singapore General Practitioner*,² and the 1997 Singapore Medical Association (SMA) Lecture titled *In Search of Future Role Models in Medicine*.³ For his contribution to the medical profession he was made an Honorary Member of the SMA⁴ and Fellow of the Academy of Medicine.

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew had this to say of him: "*I have known Dr Wong for many decades. The Singapore Government and I would like to place his public service on record.*" Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean said: "*We owe a great deal to Dr Wong for having nurtured a whole generation of upright civil servants. He helped to set the values we live by today.*"⁵ For his contributions and services to our nation and country, the Singapore Government awarded Dr Wong the Public Service Star (BBM) in 1983, and the Meritorious Service Medal (PJG) in 1989.

Dr Wong is survived by his wife, Dr Pat Wong, his 3 children, Professor Mark Wong, Professor John Wong, and Dr Jill Wong, daughters-in-law Marlene and Kwong Hui, and 5 grandchildren.

Dr Wong Heck Sing, in his journey of life, has reminded each of us of the lines Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-72) wrote:

*"Life of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time."*

In his 1997 SMA Lecture, Dr Wong spoke on the "*need to inspire a whole generation of new doctors through their role models*". By his life and deeds, Dr Wong was one such role model.

Goh Lee Gan, FCFPS and Chew Chin Hin, FAMS



Dr Cheong Pak Yean conferring SMA Honorary Membership to Dr Wong Heck Sing.

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