

Dr Khoo Oon Teik (1921 – 2012)

The Early Years

Dr Khoo Oon Teik was born on 30 March 1921 in Penang, West Malaysia. He received his early education in Penang at the Anglo Chinese School and subsequently went on to study Medicine at the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore. His



medical career however began early before graduation as his studies were interrupted by the Japanese invasion of Singapore in 1941. He was a section leader of the Medical Auxiliary service which organised the deployment of senior medical students in the operating theatre of the Singapore General Hospital. After the fall of Singapore to the Japanese Army, he served as a laboratory assistant in the Woodbridge Psychiatric Hospital to which the patients of the Singapore General Hospital had been evacuated to. He was subsequently sent to the infamous Siam Railway in 1944. Returning after the end of the war, he resumed his medical studies and graduated with a Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (LMS) in 1946.

The Teaching Years

In 1947, he began his career with the College of Medicine. He was appointed Tutor in clinical medicine and Chief Clinical Assistant to Professor Gordon Ransome. In 1948, together with Professor ES Monteiro, they formed Medical Unit II, one of two medical units of the University of Singapore at the Outram Road General Hospital (now Singapore General Hospital).

In 1965, he was appointed Professor of Medicine and the Head of Medical Unit II, and in 1971, the first Chairman of the combined University Departments of Medicine. He remained with the University until his retirement in 1979, a career in the teaching of medicine spanning 32 years.

During Professor Khoo's tenure in the University and the Singapore General Hospital, he pioneered many initiatives. He began what were perhaps the first attempts at specialisation in Medicine in Singapore.

In 1948, he ran the General Hospital Skin Clinic which, at the time, included the Leprosy Clinic. In the 1950s, he helped set up Alcoholics Anonymous in Singapore.

In 1961, he was instrumental in setting up the first renal unit in Singapore and became its first Director. This later expanded to include the Renal Unit Dialysis Centre in 1971. In 1966, he encouraged routine gastroscopies and in 1967, encouraged the forming of a nuclear medicine laboratory. In 1967, he formed the coronary care unit in Singapore at the Medical Unit II and in 1974, he set up a Lipid Clinic as well as a Metabolic unit. When he retired in 1979, there were, in the Department of Medicine, beginnings of the specialities of Cardiology, Endocrinology and Metabolism, Gastroenterology, Dermatology and Nephrology.

The high esteem in which Professor Khoo is held, is evidenced by his election to many high offices including the Mastership of the Academy of Medicine, the Chairmanship of its Chapter of Physicians, the Presidency of the Singapore Dermatological Society and the Chairmanship of the National Kidney Foundation. Indeed, he may well be regarded as a true pioneer in the specialities of Nephrology and Dermatology in Singapore. In addition, he was a Member of the University's Council and its Board of Postgraduate Medical Studies, and he has also served on the Singapore Medical Council. He was a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons, the Royal College of Physicians of Glasgow and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians for some 50 years.

A Doctor and a Friend

Dr Khoo was interested in many areas in medicine but there was one area in medicine that has held his abiding interest through all these years. This was the care of the patients with chronic kidney failure.

In the mid 1950s, the death of his brother from chronic renal failure had made him determined to help similarly afflicted patients. When dialysis became available, he spared no efforts to make this possible in Singapore. He raised funds, obtained machines and equipment, invited renal experts to Singapore, and arranged for nurses and doctors to go for training. The first dialysis in Singapore was carried out on 1 September 1961.

This eventually led to the setting up of the first renal unit in Singapore at Outram Road General Hospital (now Singapore General Hospital) in 1961. This unit subsequently led to the setting up of a chronic dialysis unit. It was the beginning of Nephrology in Singapore. This unit is now

the Department of Renal Medicine. This department has helped train nephrologists who have in turn developed renal units in almost all the restructured hospitals in Singapore.

In 1972, he helped set up the Singapore Society of Nephrology to promote the development of Nephrology in Singapore. The contacts with colleagues from neighbouring countries soon developed into the first Colloquium of Nephrology, a meeting of expert nephrologists. This was held in Singapore in 1974 and was the first of many subsequent colloquia which became known as the Asian Colloquium of Nephrology. He was widely respected as one of the pioneers of Nephrology in Asia and at the fourth Colloquium of Nephrology in Hong Kong, he was honoured by the Nephrology fraternity in Asia by having a lecture—the Oon Teik Khoo Lecture—named after him. Indeed, he was the Founder of Nephrology in Singapore.

Dr Khoo also realised that many patients with kidney failure needed help from the community to cope with their disease. In 1968, he realised that for dialysis to be made available to renal patients, there was a need to raise funds. He mobilised colleagues and like-minded doctors and formed the National Kidney Foundation of Singapore (NKF). The NKF was officially inaugurated on 7 April 1969 to help needy patients who needed dialysis. In 1999, with an endowment from the NKF, the National University of Singapore set up a Khoo Oon Teik Professorship in Nephrology honouring the contributions of Dr Khoo to the field of nephrology.

Aside from Nephrology, Dr Khoo had been active in many other fields. A devout Christian, he had been a member of the Christian Medical Commission of the World Council of Churches, the first President of the International Congress of Christian Physicians, Honorary Consultant to Alcoholics Anonymous, and the Samaritans of Singapore. He was past Master of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore and was a mentor to medical students residing in the King Edward VII Hall of residence for many years, while serving as its Hall Master.

Dr Khoo Oon Teik was a man who has inspired many others to follow his footsteps as a doctor, mentor and teacher, and he had touched the lives of many. He passed away on 5 March 2012 after a long period of illness.

He was a truly remarkable gentleman.

Evan JC Lee (Senior Director, National Kidney Foundation, Singapore)

Chin Hin Chew (Past Master 1973 – 1975)
