

## HEALTH CARE IN THE FIFTIES: PART 2 *Reminiscences from our Veteran Colleagues*

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### The Travelling Dresser

Haji Mohamad bin Abdul Latiff's study was interrupted by the Japanese occupation (1941-1945). After the war ended, armed only with a Junior Cambridge certificate, he was immediately accepted as a *probationer dresser* (trainee hospital assistant) at Kuantan District Hospital. He was given hospital quarters and received \$40 a month.

It was the Emergency period with the communist insurgency in full swing; he saw many soldiers and communists admitted with gunshot wounds. In those days, there were only two doctors in the 150-bedded District Hospital, hence medical assistants and nurses took on lots more clinical responsibilities than it is now. His duty during school visits was to check Std. 1 pupils for enlarged spleen; a sign of malaria. Half of the children were found to have splenomegaly and were treated with quinine. There were so many cases of malnutrition and worm infestation that iron tonics and deworming were routinely administered to every patient. He had to grind and mix the iron tonic himself following a specified formula. Patients were given a dose of castor oil after deworming and passed out balls of worms.

On passing the Grade 3 Dresser Examination in 1947, he was given the post of *travelling dresser* covering villages in Kuantan and Pekan. He recalled that he had to visit some villages by bus, and often by boat as well since there were hardly any roads linking them to the town. He had to carry the medications, a portable stove and a boiler (to sterilize the needles and glass syringes). Special permission was obtained for him to give procaine penicillin injection. He noted that the injection produced dramatic cure for yaws, a non-syphilitic infection caused by *Treponema* that is hardly seen nowadays. He came across many cases of filariasis in a village.

Being a congenial person, he was assigned to Pulau Tioman where part of his duty was to play host to many dignitaries who stayed at the dispensary since there were no hotels on

the island then. Pay day was a four-hour ride on a fishing boat to Mersing to collect his salary in cash.

After serving in Pulau Tioman for three years (1952-1955), he was transferred to Kuala Lipis General Hospital where he passed the Grade 1 Hospital Assistant Examination and earned a salary of \$366 per month. Kuala Lipis was the capital of Pahang at the time. Thereafter he was posted again as a *travelling dresser* covering Lipis and Jerantut districts. He related one unforgettable incident that occurred while he was accompanying some Ministry of Health officers on a visit to Ulu Tembeling, Kuala Tahan. A young lady approached the group and insisted on meeting him. She brought along a live chicken, some *petai* (a jungle fruit), a pumpkin and a jar of *tempoyak* (fermented durian) as gifts to him. Apparently he had cured her paralysis previously with three injections using his miracle concoction of vitamin B complex and liver extract!

Haji Mohamad was later transferred to Kota Bharu General Hospital where he retired in 1980. He continued working on contract until his last post at the Pengkalan Chepa Welfare Home in 1986. His excellent community services did not go unnoticed and he was presented with several state awards (AMN, PPM, PJK). After retirement, he served as a member of the Pahang Public Service Commission.



Figure 1. HJ Mohamad Abdul Latiff

### The Expatriate Doctor

Dr S Sundaram, a native of Madras, India, was recruited to work in Malaya in 1953 but it did not work out. However, a chance meeting with Dr Doraisamy, an established GP in KL and a retired superintendent of General Hospital Kuala Lumpur, led to an offer to do locum work in Dr Doraisamy's clinic in Malacca Street, Kuala Lumpur.

He noted many of his Chinese patients came from the nearby Petaling Street. Through his house calls, he realised overcrowding of the households there – up to 10 families could be staying in one shop lot. The sight of little children in rags huddled together on the bare floor tugged at his heart. He would return to these homes with clothing, blankets and mattresses. Fortunately, textile merchants nearby were also his patients and a casual conversation led to regular donations of materials to his less fortunate patients. The charitable activities were later continued by the Petaling Jaya Lions Club which he formed with about thirty members in 1962.

In the fifties, Kuala Lumpur was equipped with pipe water, telephone (4 digit telephone number) and electricity. Sanitation was still poorly developed – night soils were collected at dawn as there were few flushing toilets then. There were two main government hospitals; Kuala Lumpur General Hospital which catered for the locals and Bangsar Hospital which catered for the Europeans (later opened to government servants and private patients). He occasionally volunteered his service at Tung Shin Hospital, a charity hospital that offered free delivery. Tuberculosis was very common then necessitating two separate hospitals, one at Jalan Pahang and another in Cheras (Lady Templar Hospital).

In 1958, he opened his own practice at Lebu Ampang. Although rental was \$150 per month, he had to pay \$5000 tea money to the main tenant to secure the lot. He hired a Chinese clinic assistant for \$150 per month and a Eurasian retired army dresser as a dispenser for \$200 per month. His reputation as a humble and kind doctor who never refuses a house call spread and he attracted many Indian and Malay patients from nearby Kampung Baru. He also attracted the lower and middle income group with his lower consultation fees of \$5-\$10 per house call. Before the introduction of syrup cough mixtures by drug companies, he prepared his own cough mixture using a formula he learnt from Madras General Hospital. He joined the Selangor Indian Football Association and was one of the medical officers in charge during the Merdeka Football Tournaments which started in 1957.

Although he could not achieve his ambition to be a surgeon, Dr Sundaram continued learning and was among the first batch to sit for the MCGP in 1964. He remains an active GP at his clinic in Lebu Ampang.



Figure 2. Dr S Sundaram then and now.

### The Social Activist

The death of his mother at a young age spurred Chen Man Hin to pursue a life dedicated to healing. Coming from a poor family, he was fortunate that an uncle agreed to finance his studies which cost \$500 per term at the King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore. He was among the first batch of 90 medical students when the college resumed in 1946, the year after the Japanese surrendered. Most lecturers were from England and New Zealand, but the notable local staff included Prof. Sandosham and Prof. T.J. Danaraj.

Student life was fun despite ragging from the seniors. He remembered young Mahathir Mohamad was also studying at the same college and he stayed at an adjoining hostel. In retrospect, he and other senior students would have ragged him more if they knew he would become so famous later in life. Dr Chen's compassion for the unfortunate was sparked when a group of fellow students were detained for being communist sympathisers. As Vice-President of the Student's Union, he organised charity funds and helped to send food parcels to the detainees.

Upon completing the housemanship in Singapore, he returned to work in Seremban General Hospital in 1953. There was no elective caesarean section and family planning services were rudimentary. As a consequence, septic abortions due to botched attempts by illegal abortionists were common. Infections were common cause of admissions; he saw tetanus and diphtheria practically every week. Other infections such as tuberculosis, typhoid, and typhus were also common. In his third year of working there, he developed pleurisy and was treated for several months.

After getting married in 1956 to a Kirby trained teacher, he decided to open his own private practice. He managed to rent a shop lot from a Chinese recreation club for \$50 per month and his brother-in-law made the furniture. With the prevailing spirit of goodwill among businessmen in those days, the landlord and his brother-in-law were very lenient with payments

and allowed him to 'pay as he can'. At that time, Seremban had only two main roads and ten private clinics. Many of his patients were from the surrounding slums. Their hardship and poor living conditions plus their complaints regarding the local authorities grabbed his attention and sympathy. He felt he should do more to help his patients. So, on the invitation of several Seremban GPs, he joined the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1964 (PAP is the governing political party in Singapore now). Just before Singapore separated from the then Malaya, he co-founded the Democratic Action Party, a leading opposition party.

Dr Chen still practises his first love, i.e medicine, in Seremban today. He finds the art of medicine fun and stimulating, keeps his mind alert and makes his life much more interesting.



**Figure 3. Dr Chen Man Hin in his clinic (insert: when he was a medical student).**

### The Reluctant Doctor

It was a quirk of fate that switched K Dharmaratnam from Engineering to Medicine. After obtaining the best Senior Cambridge result in 1941, he studied engineering at the Technical College in High Street (now renamed as Jalan Tun HS Lee), Kuala Lumpur. Sensing growing racial tension among the Malays and the Chinese, he was sent by his family to continue his engineering studies in Colombo, Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka).

While in Colombo, he was persuaded by a friend to try for the Medical Entrance Examination. He was again the best student, and was pushed to study Medicine at the University of Colombo. Tuition fees were free and he only had to pay 60 rupees a month for lodging. Each medical student had a cadaver to dissect. He was also a keen sportsman and played badminton for Ceylon against Malaya in 1948. He worked for a few years in Ceylon after graduating in 1952.

He returned to Malaya in 1956 and started working in Johor Baru General Hospital. At that time, this six-storey hospital was the most modern hospital in Malaya. It had lifts and flush toilets, at a time when half the households in Johor Baru were using bucket latrines. In contrast, Kuala Lumpur General Hospital was, at that time, a 'cattle shed'. The administrative staff, senior doctors and nursing staff were mainly British.

Patients had to bring their own glass bottles to fill the medication. Injections were avoided due to cases of limb paralysis post injection. He was exempted from the one year housemanship posting as he had worked in Colombo. Compulsory service and the Annual Practising Certificate were unheard of. With a basic monthly pay of \$734 he could afford to buy a brand new Austin 40 costing \$4050 and petrol was only \$1.57 per gallon.

He was transferred to Kluang District Hospital after a few months. Although there were only two doctors, British volunteer army physicians managed referred cases. His stint in hospital was short and soon, he was persuaded to run a private practice in Batu Pahat after the previous doctor was shot dead by the communists. There were four general practitioners in Batu Pahat in 1956 and they worked from 8.30 am to 5 pm. Night and 24 hours clinics were non-existent. It was common practice then for private doctors to work part-time at the Batu Pahat District Hospital from 5-8 pm for \$500 a month. There were no panel patients and medical leave from private clinics were not accepted by employers. Despite reasonable income as a GP, Dr K Dharmaratnam realised that he preferred non-clinical work and rejoined government service as a Batu Pahat District Health Officer in 1958 before he was awarded a WHO scholarship to do Diploma in Public Health at the University of Singapore. As a health officer, he was given a driver's allowance of \$60 and mileage claim of 40 cents per mile.

He remained an active sportsman and represented the country at tennis in 1962 despite holding a Ceylonese citizenship. He forfeited his Malayan citizenship when he overstayed in Colombo and was at a quandary. After returning to Malaya he realised that the much anticipated racial riot did not happen and Malaya was prospering while there was unrest in Ceylon. Although there was a threat from Indonesia, he reapplied and regained his Malaysian citizenship in 1966.

Dr Dharmaratnam was posted to various parts of the country before retiring in 1981. As a writer of seven books on religion, he received regular invitations to speak locally and abroad. He was decorated with a 'Golden Shawl' for his speech on the Mahabharatha in Coimbatore, South India in 1992. He still does locum in his spare time.



**Figure 4. Dr Dharmaratnam then and now.**