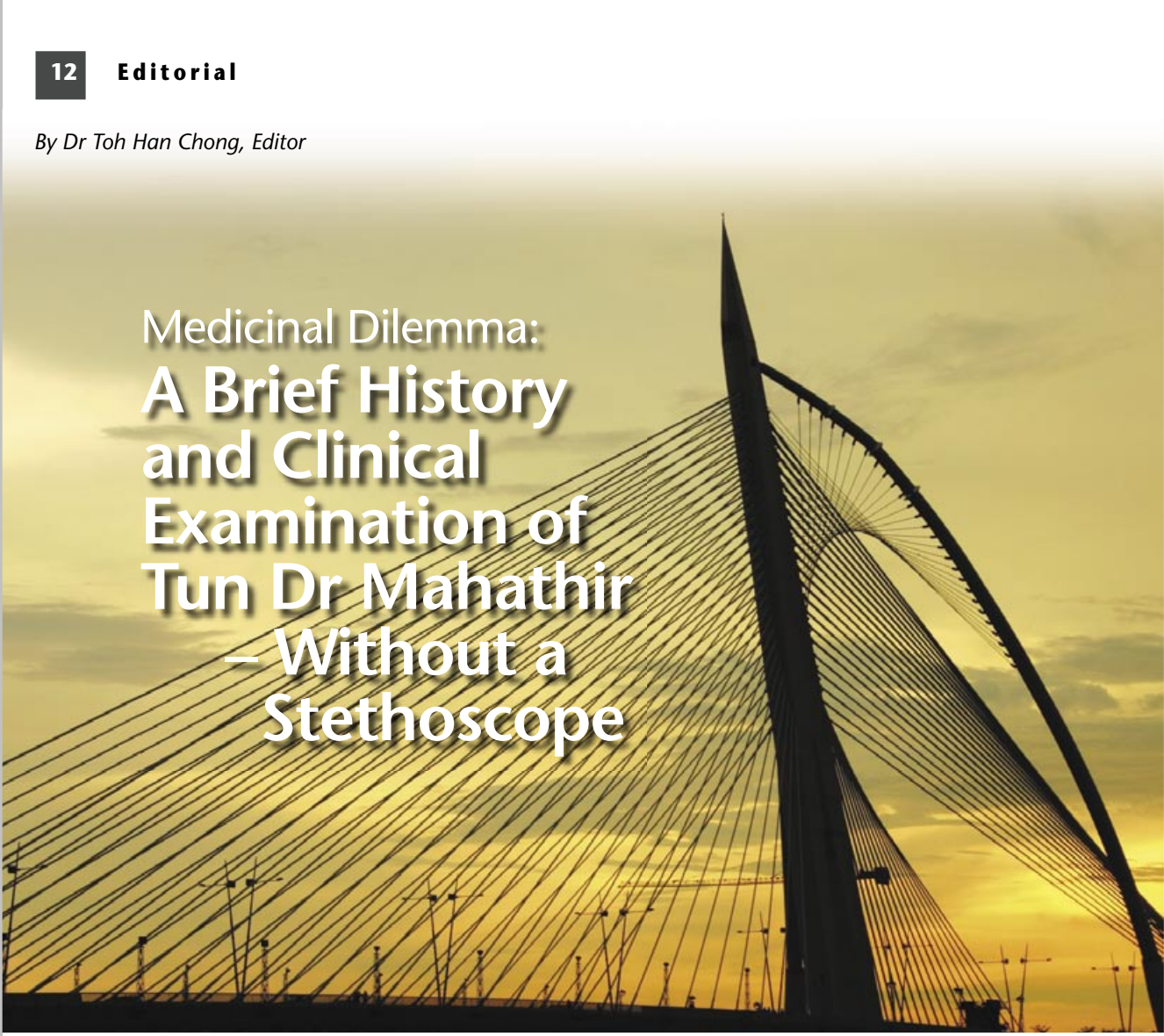


By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor



Medicinal Dilemma: A Brief History and Clinical Examination of Tun Dr Mahathir – Without a Stethoscope

Singapore Medical Association (SMA) 1st Vice President Dr Wong Chiang Yin, Editorial Manager Krysanita Tan, and I had lunch at a Jalan Imbi *kedai kopi* in Kuala Lumpur before driving to Putrajaya to meet Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The heavenly *hor fun* and *kopi peng* brought back memories of the first time I fell in love.

It was in the late 1970s and my family and I were having dinner at a *kedai kopi* behind my late paternal grandparents' Anderson Road home in Ipoh, Perak. She was a willowy Cantonese teen helping at her family Ipoh *hor fun* stall. Even under the harsh fluorescent light, in her greasy T-shirt, dowdy skirt and slippers, she was beautiful: long slender neck, shoulder length hair, luminous large eyes and a radiant glow. She moved with a quiet grace wiping tables, collecting empty bowls and taking dinner orders. I never got to know her name, and she never got to know that geeky

Singaporean teenager with noodles dangling from his gawking gaping mouth. A few years later, when I returned to eat at that food stall, she was gone.

It was these very values of resilience, diligence and filial piety in the Ipoh *hor fun* girl that the then Minister of Education Tun Dr Mahathir admired about the Chinese. Medical doctors invariably come to appreciate the tapestry of cultural and ideological milieu that each ethnic group brings to the doctor-patient relationship, and which has made our lives the richer for it.

We were ushered into Tun Dr Mahathir's room with a view at the Perdana Leadership Foundation at the resplendent Putrajaya, which rose through those difficult times of the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis. The pre-interview brief for us was an assuring no 'OB' markers; we could ask him anything we wished. Because of his overpowering omnipresence in the story of

modern Malaysia, I expected to meet an in-your-face larger-than-life icon. Tun Dr Mahathir was slighter than I expected, at least next to the two XXL Singaporeans present before him. His warm quiet smile put us at ease. He was relaxed, reflective, resonant, and sharp as a surgical scalpel. The whole interview was so much easier than my Surgery Finals short cases under the critical eye of the daunting external examiner Professor Norman Browse. Professor Browse growled during my first short case examination, “Young man, is that how you were taught to examine the female breast?” At that point, my hands trembled uncontrollably on the said breast, and I began to sweat profusely onto the patient’s bed.

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Tun Dr Mahathir recently gave an interview to Channel NewsAsia, and countered that the achievements of political leaders could be debunked after they were long gone. Tun Dr Mahathir has been the longest-serving Malaysian Prime Minister, and even his worst critics cannot deny him of his lasting legacies. Tun Dr Mahathir passionately championed for the survival, rights and equality of the indigenous people of Malaysia, the Bumiputeras. I read *The Malay Dilemma*, and then thought of two films I had watched about indigenous people in free Western democracies where legal equality existed.

The first was New Zealander Lee Tamahori’s powerfully disturbing *Once Were Warriors*, about impoverished and disenfranchised urban Maoris and their once proud tradition dying in a haze

of alcohol and domestic violence. The other film was Sherman Alexie’s touching *Smoke Signals*, which told the story of a pair of marginalised Idaho trailer park Coeur d’Alene Indian boys searching for their native Indian roots and unearthing family truths. The award-winning lead role of Thomas Builds-the-Fire was played by my former Lester B Pearson United World College schoolmate, Evan Adams. The last I heard, Evan was studying to be a doctor to further serve his Canadian Native Indian community.

Therefore, I began to understand Tun Dr Mahathir’s tough-love approach towards the Bumiputeras, fearing that a noble race rich in spirit, faith, history, tradition, gentility and great potential to harness a fertile land, could be socially and economically ostracised, even as indigenous people could still be in great democracies where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable rights.

The Malay Dilemma was born out of that hoary autoimmune disease called civil disorder, in the form of the May 1969 race riots. High dose immunosuppression such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) was prescribed to damp down that terrifying flare in Malaysia’s post-Independence history.

But many years of NEP, and later, the National Development Policy (NDP), may have caused proximal myopathy to the drive and motivation of some Malaysians. Unequal distribution of fat to the already truncal obesity, interscapular fat pad and fatty livers of the urban rich, but not to the wasted rural poor, and ischaemia to the peripheral limbs of the hinterland, may have created a potentially hairier, puffier, more thin-skinned and polarised socio-cultural complexion in a Malaysia with a raised blood pressure. The well-intended but bureaucratic NEP, and for that matter, any ideology, could and has been hijacked by the greedy-for-mores. Many Malays became disillusioned with the NEP.

Tun Dr Mahathir, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim and many Malays have all asked for a rapid taper of this immunosuppression that was meant to equilibrate the socio-economic homeostasis in Malaysia. But rapid removal of this long-dependent immunosuppression could be challenging and might cause postural giddiness and even another autoimmune flare (never happened since 1969) in this progressive, complex, multicultural society. Tun Dr Mahathir once expressed hopes for a “*Bangsa Malaysia*” (“One People, One Nation”) and Pak Lah has asked for a greater “National Unity” (“*Perpaduan*”). But, one thing is for sure, the

NEP overall has not stunted Malaysia's economic growth in spite of some structural and spiritual osteoporosis, and susceptibility to rogue social and financial opportunistic infections.

Another of Tun Dr Mahathir's visionary legacies is transforming Malaysia into a modern industrialised nation with a prosperous export-driven economy. Ghana and Malaysia both gained post-colonial independence in 1957, and at that time, both their economies were struggling at the same level. The difference between the two countries is stark today. This good physician has a love of technology to heal the ailments and reinvigorate his country. Some technologies and projects were costly and huge and immeasurably well-invested, others were costly and huge and became immeasurably untenable.

One of my dearest friends was being interviewed for National University of Singapore's (NUS) Law School Entrance in the late 1980s. Among friends, her nickname was "Blur". At that time, Malaysian national pride flourished with the launch of the national car, the Proton Saga. It was a bold and audacious move to build an auto industry when even the most technologically advanced country in the world, the United States, which had sent men into outer space many times over, was reeling from the juggernaut Japanese auto industry competition. The then Dean of NUS Law Faculty asked 'Blur' at the interview, "What do you think of the Proton Saga?" 'Blur' replied, "Duh, is it a particle smaller than a proton?" 'Blur' did not get into NUS Law School. She is today a happy homemaker. However, based on recent events in Kuala Lumpur, Tun Dr Mahathir might fear that 'Blur' could be right after all, as colliding elements are putting pressure on Proton Saga's competitiveness.



The 1997 Asian Economic Crisis created a terrible financial pandemic. Tun Dr Mahathir chose not to follow the prescription of the *Mat Salleh Lokun* International Monetary Fund. He wheeled the DIL and hypotensive Malaysia into a reverse barrier nursing clean-air isolation ward under hourly parameters, gave multiple cc (capital control) of IV FFP (financial fallout package) to prevent further bleeding, pegged the ringgit to the US dollar at a fixed rate, and the country continued to produce and sell their well-priced goods from the isolation room. Experts may argue that the septicaemia might already have turned the corner by the time isolation, respite and many cc of IV FFP was introduced. But Malaysia did recover faster than most Asian countries from this Asian financial crisis.

At the end of the interview, I sensed a poignancy in Tun's final answer about Frank Sinatra's *My Way*. On behalf of the SMA, we presented Tun Dr Mahathir with a scroll penned by a famous Singapore calligrapher, Kee Meng Cheng, which read: "For Country, For People". Tun Dr Mahathir's report card as Prime Minister of Malaysia and Asian Elder Statesman must surely be a highly positive one. I believe his old Alor Star teacher, Mr Lim Chen Chai, would be very proud of him today, in spite of possibly having chided him in the past for talking too much in class, maybe infringing on the civil liberties of a classmate or two, or getting too worked up with a rich Chinese boy trying to sell him some toys at a cutthroat price. We thanked Tun Dr Mahathir for this great privilege and said our goodbyes at Putrajaya.

As SMA 1st Vice President's Lexus glided smoothly down the North-South Highway towards Singapore, I surveyed the lush carpets of oil palm on both sides, the mystical highlands in the distance, and the immense equatorial rainforest in between. This was a rich, vast and beautiful land. The great diversity of the rainforest was alive and well, with no Darwinian division or death for each highly adapted plant species. I listened to lots of Cantonese songs on the four-hour journey home, courtesy of a Malaysian Chinese radio station. As a thunderstorm broke as quickly as it came, the sun peeped out as we neared the Causeway. The ballad playing then was *Love is Too Difficult*, a haunting duet by Jackie Cheung and Anita Mui. I discovered that Dr Wong Chiang Yin actually had a good singing voice.

Looks can be deceiving. ■