



Dr Toh delivering his citation at the SMA Lecture 2013

Citation for Mr Ngiam Tong Dow

By Dr Charles Toh

Good afternoon SMA President, distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. It is an honour and pleasure for me to read the citation of a treasured and colourful friend, Mr Ngiam Tong Dow. Through the years, I have learnt a lot from him outside Medicine. He has never been afraid to speak his mind on issues passionate to him, even when he was in civil service, in the presence of ministers. After retirement from civil service, he continues to sit on many boards, and remains vocal in private and in public. I'm sure you enjoy reading his articles in our newspapers from time to time. Mr Ngiam is a true Singaporean; born and bred here. He studied Economics in National University of Singapore and obtained his master's in Public Administration from Harvard University. He came from a humble background with Hainanese ancestry. His father was a migrant from Hainan. In ancient times, many convicts and smugglers

were evicted from mainland China to Hainan. I once asked him whether his father was an entrepreneur or a gangster. He replied that his father was a court interpreter; honest and highly respected like him. At 35, he was the youngest Permanent Secretary (Perm Sec) ever appointed in Singapore's civil service.

I recall some years back when Mr Ngiam was Head of the Economic Development Board and I was in the private sector; he asked me to submit a paper to him on medical tourism in Singapore. In my paper, I highlighted the importance of medical tourism as a significant component of our knowledge and service industry. Additionally, I opined that Medicine in the private sector served as an outlet for disgruntled doctors in the public sector; thus preventing these doctors from emigrating to countries like Australia. At that time, the Ministry of Health (MOH) was somewhat wary that our medical school was producing



too many doctors and creating unnecessary demand for healthcare. As a result, the student intake of our medical school was reduced for a number of years. Medical tourism was not something MOH was interested in, nor was the issue of an ageing population a concern at that time. Mr Ngiam, however, felt otherwise.

When I was chairman of the National Medical Research Council (NMRC), he was Perm Sec to Dr Richard Hu, then the Minister of Finance. At that time, NMRC was fortunate to be reasonably well funded. It was the first time that MOH had officially initiated and supported medical research in the country. After a few years, we introduced the clinician scientist programme to enhance research and strengthen the research culture. Mr Ngiam was very supportive of this idea and we received additional funding for the programme. As the initial take-up rate for the programme was low, we had substantial savings, which the Ministry of Finance allowed us to retain. This was later used as core funding to strengthen medical specialist centres such as National Neuroscience Institute, National Cancer Centre and National Eye Centre.

In many ways, Mr Ngiam was one of the top civil servants who was very supportive of our health services and research. Although he had the vision of making Singapore into a regional medical hub, he never ignored the reality that we are surrounded by about 250 million people nearby and another 100 million slightly further away. He was also keenly aware that doctors alone without paramedical staff could not sustain both the public and private medical centres. Our population is too small to provide comprehensive paramedical manpower

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support. Our people tend to shun the lower paying jobs like nursing and technical support. Therefore, we cannot survive without foreign nurses and paramedical personnel, both in the public and private sectors.

It is a pity that in his career as a top civil servant, Mr Ngiam was never appointed as Perm Sec in the Ministry of Health; otherwise, I’m sure he would have made tremendous contributions to the standard of healthcare in our country. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge and show our appreciation to Mr Ngiam for his passionate concern for developing our city state into a global health hub, even though this passion is not translated into his personal healthcare – he still loves *char kway teow* (a local rice noodle dish not known for its health benefits).

Mr Ngiam has been a long-standing member of the Singapore Island Country Club. He used to be a regular golfer, but not a fanatical one. Unfortunately, his recent hip injury and surgery has put an end to this. He is now a regular but passive member; by passive, I mean he goes to the club only for *makan* (Malay for “meals”) and to share his views on current affairs, local and global politics with his friends. I’ve always enjoyed dialogue with him, and I’ve never failed to learn something new each time.

Thank you very much. **SMA**