

# A LIFETIME OF MEDICINE

By Prof Woo Keng Thye

**FROM OLD** *World Charm to Majulah Singapura – The Curious Adventures of a Doctor from Jaffna* describes Dr K Puvanendran's early boyhood days in Jaffna, a township in Ceylon, to his later life in Singapore, where he practiced as a neurologist until his retirement at 76. The first part of the book explores Puvan's early years – his family life, and the growing up and schoolgoing years in his hometown in Jaffna. Life for young Puvan was idyllic; he lived in a house by the sea and spent the evenings after dinner playing with his siblings. Puvan has had a scholastic aptitude from a young age, and won a prestigious science prize in school. He was also an accomplished puccalo maestro (whistler), a fair violinist and a charming singer.

Puvan started the first year of his medical course at Colombo in 1956. He finished his medical studies and remained in Ceylon to complete his internship at the General Hospital in Jaffna in 1962. In 1967, Puvan went to London to do his MRCP and trained in Neurology at the Institute of Neurology in Queen Square. Meanwhile, his wife had obtained a job as an anesthetist in London. After London, he wanted to fulfil his long cherished desire to serve in his native village of Karainagar in Jaffna. However, the escalating riots against the Tamils in Ceylon and the discrimination they were facing made him feel insecure about returning to work in his native country. So he enquired about a job in Singapore before going back to Ceylon. Some time later, Puvan received a letter from Singapore's Ministry of Health with job offers for him

and his wife. He had been appointed senior registrar in Medicine and his wife, senior registrar in Anaesthesia.

In the second part of the book, Puvan writes about Singapore in the 1970s, an experience akin to falling into a rabbit hole like Alice in Wonderland. He saw peculiar things and strange people, some of which were hard to understand. From Dr Puvan's first glimpse of Singapore at Paya Lebar Airport, he was in awe of the strange signs. On the customs declaration form, he had to state if he had "any more baggage or wives expect to import". After passing through customs, he saw a signboard that read "\$500 fine for littering", and another that read "SPIT HERE". He intoned the second signboard's words, which seemed like a command to him. Puvan thought it would be a crime if he did not obey, but his mouth was dry from the first notice about the \$500 fine.

Puvan was posted to Medical Unit I in Outram Road General Hospital (ORGH), and formed an almost immediate bond with Prof Gordon Arthur Ransome from the beginning because of their specialty interest. He had a healthy respect for Prof Ransome as a great teacher. Prof Ransome was fond of the big toe jerk as a clinical test and would demonstrate it to his students, and he also had a plethora of clinical tricks that he would pull out of a magician's hat. Puvan co-authored several medical papers with Prof Ransome. Perhaps the most famous one that they wrote was "Syndrome of Dejerine's Fourth Reich", which was on one of those freak strokes; freakish because,

unlike usual strokes, the facial palsy was not associated with weakness of limbs, but was associated with tenth and twelfth cranial nerve palsy instead.

Puvan has a strange sense of humour and believes that life was far too important to be taken seriously. He noticed that during the 1970s, Singaporean doctors were serious-minded like the average citizen, and their opinions often fell in line with the Government's stance to make the Singapore story a success. The "Stop at Two" policy, the legalisation of abortions, the "Keep Singapore Clean" campaign, carpooling, the National Courtesy Campaign, the Social Development Unit, and anything done as an organised campaign – they would do. Puvan was different. He could step outside of himself and see his own humour, the way the audience saw it. To this end, Puvan has succeeded in conveying these topics lightheartedly in his book by sprinkling generous doses of humorous anecdotes, mainly pertinent observations of his colleagues and fellow men and often peppered with his native wit.

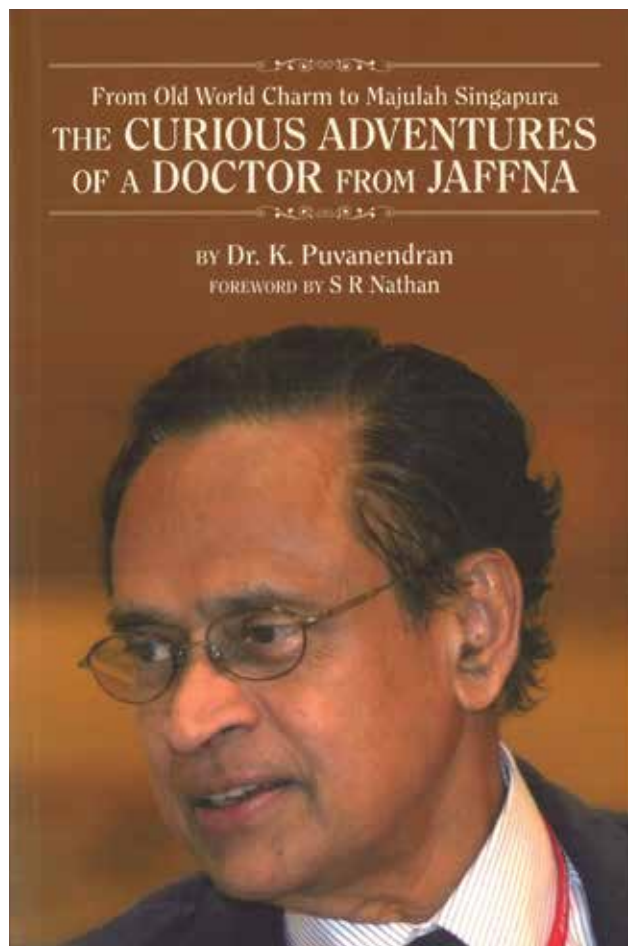
The third and final part of the book contains a series of 25 memorable cases, somewhat like Dr Watson's casebook on Sherlock Holmes, except these are neurological and sleep disorder cases, which display Puvan's keen diagnostic sense.

Puvan has taught students and doctors for almost 40 years, but he noticed that the teaching environment and students' attitudes have changed. He notes that in the 1970s and 1980s, there was great commitment to learning. He also contends that evidence-based Medicine is the commonly used phrase today, but to him, it is just another way of removing a physician's autonomy to treat an individual on a case-by-case basis.

After practising Medicine for 50 years and having lived in Singapore since 1971, what has he seen through the looking glass? He came to Singapore as a senior registrar in Medicine, who was trained in Neurology; worked in ORGH, now known as Singapore General Hospital (SGH); moved to Tan Tock Seng Hospital; and finally, ended up as a senior consultant and associate professor at the National Neurological Institute. His wife, soulmate and confidante, Kamala continues to work as a senior consultant anaesthetist at SGH.

Puvan, who is a grandfather now, fondly looks back on his life and comments, "I think I had a more meaningful life than what is in store for my grandchildren here. As a nation and as a society, we are not just defined by our beautiful skyline, our green city and the thriving economy. Singapore has every material thing. Yet, is everything enough? Is this all there is in life?"

This charming book is easy to read, and offers much wisdom and humour; apart from medical knowledge (especially in Neurology and sleep disorders that the author is an expert in). I would strongly recommend it to all doctors and medical students – copies should be made available in hospital and medical libraries. **SMA**



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