

Dr Tham Cheok Fai

– Father of Singapore Neurosurgery

(8 October 1925 – 4 December 2013)

By Dr James Khoo

DR THAM CHEOK FAI, born in 1925, took up Neurosurgery late, as he first started his career in Orthopaedics at Singapore General Hospital, with colleagues such as Dr N Balachandran, Dr William Fung and Prof Donald Gunn.

Later, Dr Tham switched to Neurosurgery to fill a much-needed service after the first local neurosurgeon, Dr Tseng Yuen Lin (who had been trained in Australia), passed away tragically following complications of appendicitis. In the early 1960s, the Ministry of Health sent Dr Tham to London, where he trained in his new specialty under Sir Murray Falconer of temporal epilepsy fame, at Guy's and Maudsley hospitals.

After his stint in the UK capital, he returned to start work in the Department of General Surgery, headed by Mr Jimmy Choo Jim Eng, at the then new Thomson Road Hospital in Toa Payoh. At that time, the hospital had limited facilities, and Dr Tham was only given one day a week to operate. There were also no CT scans (which started in 1977), and no MRI scans (until 1980). Therefore, he had to rely on clinical skills, even doing his own visual field charts and using classical tests like pneumoencephalography, ventriculograms and angiography (when the radiologists were available). Additionally, there were few critical care unit beds or little respirator care for neurosurgical intensive care, and not many doctors wanted to take up such a difficult and arduous career.

Despite all these handicaps, Dr Tham persisted in his vision to build up a neurosurgical department, teaching us how to handle our instruments lightly; to be meticulous in exposures, hemostasis and asepsis; and to treat all patients as best as possible, whether they were rich, poor, weak or powerful – a precept that was practiced by all the pioneering doctors of that hospital, like Prof Seah Cheng Siang, Mr Jimmy Choo Jim Eng, Dr Lee Yong Kiat, Dr Feng Pao Hsii, Dr FJ Jayaratnam and Dr John Tambyah.

One of the first to recognise the importance of microsurgery in Neurosurgery, Dr Tham became an early embracer of new technology in the 70s. He bought the best microscopes possible with limited budgets, and sent his first trainees to departments in Australia, which were good in fields such as Neuropathology, Radiology and Medical Neurology, so that they could obtain a holistic neurological education.



The late Dr Tham with his wife Dr Julie Lim

Dr Tham invited many prominent neurosurgeons from the UK, Australia and, most notably, the US to work with his trainees. He organised expert assistance from the American International Foundation of Neurosurgery to train our people after we shifted from Thomson Road Hospital to Tan Tock Seng Hospital, to start the new Neurosurgery and Neurology departments from early 1971 to 1976.

There was no private practice in those days. Nevertheless, Dr Tham would always come back, even on Sundays, to see all his patients. He also looked after his trainees well, and would invite many of them to his house, where he would share the joys of classical music, the importance of hi-fi equipment, and the elements of photography – all hobbies he was noted for.

In many ways, Dr Tham laid the foundations for Neurosurgery and Neurology to expand and develop in Singapore. Thanks to him, Singapore now has many highly trained neurosurgeons, some well subspecialised in the different fields of Neurosurgery, to serve our country and the region around us.

Dr Tham's passing marks the end of an era of pioneering spirit and socialised Medicine in Singapore. He will be remembered for his contributions, and we will miss him as a father figure who made a significant mark in the establishment of a new medical specialty. Thank you, Dr Tham. ■



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