

NURSING THROUGH THE DECADES

— INTERVIEW WITH MATRON PHYLLIS CLARA
PERREAU, A HEALTHCARE PIONEER

Conducted by Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

***IN 1936**, Matron Phyllis Clara Perreau travelled to Singapore to pursue a career in nursing, and her affinity for the local healthcare landscape has not changed in the last 78 years. After undergoing training at St Andrew's Mission Hospital (SAMH), she moved on to Middleton Hospital (MH) to practise as a nurse, taking care of patients with infectious diseases for the majority of her long career. Today, the sprightly 94-year-old is still volunteering her time at the St John's Home for Elderly Persons. In this interview, Matron Perreau shares her experiences as a nurse in pre- and post-independent Singapore, the benefits of having good doctor-nurse working relationships as well as her secrets to longevity.*



1919 - 1936: Growing up

Dr Toh Han Chong - THC: What was your childhood like?

Matron Phyllis Clara Perreau - PCP:

I was born in one of Sarawak's 11 administrative divisions, Sri Aman, which was formerly known as Simanggang. I was the third daughter out of 11 siblings in the family. Although I was born in a rural area, I attended St Mary's School, which has been a very modern and good school even until today. After I completed my Cambridge examinations in 1935 and received my results, I was 17 and still too young to join Kuching General Hospital (now known as Sarawak General Hospital) as a nursing student. So the missionaries decided that I should further my training in Singapore, and told my father, "We better send her to Singapore since there's better training there." So I moved to Singapore in 1936.

THC: What motivated you to pursue a career in nursing?

PCP: That's very simple. When I was still a student, I went to Kuching General Hospital one day and saw a nurse who looked very smart in her nursing uniform. From that day onwards, I decided that I wanted to be a nurse and to look as smart as she did.

1936 - 1945: Being a nurse in Singapore and World War II

THC: Did you undergo formal nursing training in Singapore?

PCP: I trained at SAMH from 1936 to 1939. In 1939, I joined MH (now known as the Communicable Diseases Centre) and practised there until the war broke out in 1942, which dispersed everyone. After the war ended, I continued working at MH until 1974.

Since I couldn't work in the hospital during the war, I delivered babies in people's homes. I could do so because I had a midwifery licence. Back then, we had to pass midwifery tests before we were given the full nursing certificate.

THC: I understand that you were married during the war.

PCP: I was married in St Andrew's Cathedral on 31 January 1942, a few weeks before the start of the Japanese Occupation, as the bombs were falling. My husband's cousins, who were our witnesses, wore helmets during the wedding. *(laughs)* Of course, I was dressed up as a bride.

THC: We heard that you had an interesting experience while trying to pass food to Dr Ruth Patricia Elliot, the first female medical superintendent, when she was detained at an internment camp during the war.

PCP: Dr Elliot was a missionary and the medical superintendent of SAMH then. When I first came here, she was the first person I was introduced to. I was nervous then as that was the first time I had seen a European lady with blonde hair. She was very kind to me because I was the odd one out in that mission hospital at that time, being the only Iban among Chinese nurses.

All the European sisters were captured by the Japanese soldiers and detained at the Sime Road internment camp. Although I just got married then, I wanted to try and visit Dr Elliot at the internment camp as I was rather fond of her. In order to get into the camp, I had to be very careful because the sentries would patrol the camp grounds with guns. I found a way to get in through a drain that was eight feet deep. The internment camp was quite big so when I saw the sentries going the other way, I crept inside the deep drain. I fell and hurt myself (which eventually left a scar), but kept moving on and eventually emerged. When I reached the area where the female prisoners were detained, I asked them if they knew who Dr Elliot was. They did, but I had to search for her myself. This was not an easy task as although the room was rather small, about 50 people were cramped into that space. There wasn't enough space for the prisoners to

even move. The prisoners were really ill-treated and they didn't even have anything to cover themselves and keep warm, except for some newspapers.

As I was only interested to see Dr Elliot, I searched for her and suddenly saw her huddled in one corner, covered by newspapers. When she saw me, she got a huge shock. Dr Elliot thought that it was my spirit because she heard that my house in Geylang had been bombed by the Japanese and that I had died then. It was actually the next lane that had been bombed instead. I assured her that I was still alive and passed her some eggs from my chickens and a packet of tea. I never knew how she cooked the eggs or drank the tea without water. When it was time to leave, the prisoners acted as my lookouts. Thankfully, Dr Elliot lived and all the sisters were released after the war was over. After she returned to England, she passed away there at the age of 85.

1939 - 1974: Being an infectious diseases nurse at MH

THC: What were some of the strongest memories you have from your time in MH - both good and difficult?

PCP: Everything was difficult at that time because of the war, but I have very fond memories of MH. We had very busy times in Middleton. Sometimes, there would be epidemics, mostly chickenpox and diphtheria. For patients with diphtheria, who were mostly children, we had to call the surgeon to come immediately to do the tracheotomy at an appropriate time.

THC: We now live in a different era, where vaccines are already available.

PCP: Yes! At that time, nothing else was available except tracheotomy. Thankfully, most of the patients got better. During the cholera epidemic, the patients were coming in continuously until the hospital was so packed! Besides cholera and diphtheria, we had typhoid, polio, dysentery, smallpox, chickenpox, and so on.

The cholera beds had a hole in the middle, and because the diarrhoea was so persistent, the bedpans placed underneath the holes kept filling up. We didn't think that it was dirty or anything, but just wanted to clear them as fast as we could.

THC: At that time, did you have access to antibiotics like penicillin?

PCP: Penicillin, yes. We already had access to it during the smallpox epidemic. We had to give the injections to the patients every three hours. You had to be very careful when giving the injections because it would be very painful for the patient if you pierced the pox. So we took extra care to give them the injections in between the pox.

I really enjoyed that life. I think the idea that the patients were getting better and the joy that we finally had after seeing them revived after two intravenous injections, was indescribable. If we did not have any more beds in MH, we would immediately phone Tan Tock Seng, the main hospital, and enquire if they had room for us to move some of our better patients over. There was good communication between the hospitals then. They never once said we could not send our patients over, and were ever ready to accept these patients. I really enjoyed my work there and I feel that I've fulfilled my dreams of being a nurse. In 1974, I retired from MH and received a Long Service Award from then President Benjamin Sheares.

1979 - 2002: Becoming the matron of St John's Home for Elderly Persons

THC: Tell us about your involvement at St John's Home for Elderly Persons.

PCP: I was the matron at St John's. I retired from government service in 1974, when I was 55 because you couldn't work beyond that age back then. After I retired from MH, I worked at out-of-site dispensaries for one year



before joining St John's in 1979. I had a lovely time there. As the matron, I had to take a rickshaw to the market in Potong Pasir regularly to get groceries, so that the kitchen would have fresh ingredients to cook for the patients. Money was very limited at that time, so I only had \$250 a week for food. Now, we have minivans which deliver food.

THC: How many patients were there in St John's then?

PCP: There were about 50 patients then. Today, we have 99 patients in total! When I first joined St John's, I nearly wanted to leave the next day because the condition of the home was nothing to be proud of - there were mosquitoes, rats, bugs and cockroaches! We managed to clean up the area with the help of police officers from Paya Lebar Police Station and a manager from Robinsons. Of course, a lot has changed since then and St John's has now become a beautiful home for elderly residents.

I'm now a life member of St John's, so I help in the chapel service on Sundays and I meet all these elderly people there. They're always happy to see me. *(laughs)* I've been trying to teach them how to make palm crosses for Palm Sunday for many years but they can't seem to get the knack of it.



Doctor-nurse relationships of the past

THC: Who were some of the doctors who you worked closely with?

PCP: Dr John Tambyah, whom I really admired because he was one doctor who didn't think of food for himself when he was attending to patients. Our stomachs might have been growling but we never remembered to eat; our minds were set on saving the patients first. Another was Prof Ernest Monteiro, who later became the ambassador to the US. I also worked with his son, Dr Edmund Monteiro.



Clockwise, from top right

Matron Perreau (left) presenting a prize at St John's Home

A monthly birthday celebration for senior residents at St John's Home, where

Matron Perreau (first from right) served as matron for more than two decades

Matron Perreau on her wedding day at St Andrew's Cathedral in 1942

Matron Perreau (second from right) with her nursing colleagues from MH

Photo: St John's Home for Elderly Persons



PCP: The whole medical profession has improved tremendously. I can't describe it, it's so advanced today as compared to the days of deadly infections like cholera and polio.

Personally speaking

THC: Who are the role models and inspirations in your life?

PCP: I've always admired Nelson Mandela because he was an amazing person. He was imprisoned almost 30 years, but despite the hardships he faced, he still did a good job for his people and the world.

THC: Despite being 94 years old, you're still leading an active and enriching life. What's your advice for people to live a fulfilling and meaningful life too?

PCP: Try not to have animosity in your heart. If you have anything against somebody and if you are not happy, make peace with that person. Sometimes we do annoy people and sometimes we feel very regretful about what we've done. Make peace. It's not easy to do, but once you've done it, you would have cleared up your mind and you'll have peace. And above all, give thanks for everything.

THC: Thank you very much for your time, Phyllis. ■

THC: In your opinion, has the working relationships between doctors and nurses changed over the years?

PCP: Back then, when I was still a nurse, we worked very well with the doctors. Doctors and nurses had very good working relationships and often worked hand in hand to provide care for patients. No one looked down their noses. I'm sure the doctors at that time really depended on the nurses to help them too. Some of the younger doctors did not have enough wisdom and experience as the nurses did, so they sometimes fell back on the senior nurses for advice and help.

Experiences with Medicine

THC: Did you encounter any particularly unique incidents or patients during your nursing career?

PCP: One patient that I remember quite well was a young boy with polio, who had to be put in an iron lung. This young man was the only son of an Indian man's second wife. He was only 17 when he was diagnosed with the disease and we nursed him in the iron lung for many years. But he remained very cheerful and would still talk to us. The sad thing was that since the mother was her husband's second wife, she would only receive a property from him if their son lived to 21. He did live to his 21st birthday, and she won her financial security!

THC: You have experienced various milestones in Singapore's history - from World War II to pre-independence to post-independence. What are your thoughts, looking back on how Medicine has improved and progressed throughout the years?