



A/Prof Appasamy Vijayan – A Great Mentor and Colleague

By Dr Tan Yia Swam, Editor

I WRITE this with great heaviness. March 2015 was a month of losses. Singapore lost our founding father. An even more personal loss was the unexpected and sudden passing of Mr V.

A/Prof Appasamy Vijayan was born on 15 August 1953, and passed away on 19 March 2015, aged 61. A/Prof Vijayan obtained his medical degree at the University of Madras, India. He served as a specialist medical officer in the Singapore Armed Forces, and trained in the fields of diving and hyperbaric medicine, and disaster medicine. Following his career in the armed forces, he completed his surgical training and obtained fellowships from the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (in 1997) and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow (in 1998). He was later admitted as a fellow of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore in 2003. At the time of his passing, he was president-elect of the College of Surgeons.

He was also awarded the Public Service Medal (PBM) in 2000 and the Public Service Star (BBM) and Long Service Medal (PBS) in 2011, as National Day Honours by the Singapore Government. He received the inaugural Singapore Courage Fund Healthcare Humanity Award in 2004 and the National Healthcare Group (NHG) Outstanding Citizenship Award in 2010. In that same year, he was awarded the Health Manpower Development award to pursue a master's programme in medical education.

He was the patient safety officer in the Division of Surgery, and he took the role very seriously. He came up with improvements in the time-out checklist and for every lapse in safety, he investigated with fairness, insisting on knowing the how and why, without ever attaching individual blame. He was always willing to listen and invited input from everyone; never discounting opinions from nurses or junior staff. He was the programme director of the General Surgery Residency Programme of the NHG - Alexandra Health Pte Ltd (AHPL) cluster of hospitals; a role that took up most of his time in the past few years. He handpicked the residents, with input from the consultants and registrars. He planned their curriculums and postings, and he met them regularly on a one-to-one basis (out of office hours) to get and give direct feedback on their performance and progress.

We called him "Mr V" affectionately – though I don't remember how it started. He had always been a passionate and energetic man, and was truly committed to lifelong learning. Whenever I had to call him in the middle of the night for a trauma consult, he would be alert and sprightly (even if it was 3 am!). When he needed to come in to the emergency operating theatre, he was always fresh as a daisy and cheerful; while the rest of us were running haggard and falling asleep on our feet. His commitment to teaching showed whenever he quizzed and questioned us on various aspects of the case (in the middle of the night!).

Mr V was a warm and friendly man, and genuinely cared for his trainees. He had always maintained up-to-date with the "young" folks – becoming computer savvy and holding private talks with the registrars and residents to get to know us on a social basis. When we were invited to his elder



From left

Conclusion of a successful training session: Dr Vijayan (sitting, centre) with his team of trainers (surgical consultants and registrars), as well as residents and nurses

Dr Vijayan in his element: teaching! He used newer techniques of simulation and case scenarios for teams of junior doctors to manage, with immediate feedback and critique



From top

Mr V in awesome dress up at the photo booth at the NHG-AHPL Residency Open House, with current chief resident, Dr Tan Ming Yuan

Mr V sharing finer points of surgery with medical students during a break

daughter's wedding, I was extremely honoured to be part of the happy occasion. He welcomed us like his favourite nieces and nephews, and even invited all of us to stay and dance the night away! But we were too shy to.

Mr V also had a great sense of humour – there was one memorable HOI (hour of inspiration – a Tan Tock Seng general surgery tradition) where the housemen caricatured him in the manner of “Z for Zorro”: Mr V slashing a V on a “bad” houseman who could not meet his expectations. He laughed the hardest. He was also a talented player of traditional Indian drums – which I regret not having had the privilege to see.

My greatest regret though, is not having the chance to know him better as a friend; as previously, I have always felt he was so many years my senior. He has left such big shoes to fill: clinical work; medical education with the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine; directorship of the residency programme; medical leadership with the College of Surgeons. Yet while we scramble to close up these gaps, the holes in our hearts will always remain empty.

Personally, I think the best way to honour him is to live life to the fullest, and to always work for the betterment of our patients and the profession; something that Mr V had always done. ■



Dr Tan is currently an associate consultant with the Breast Department of KK Women's and Children's Hospital. She recalls the advanced specialist training years at Tan Tock Seng Hospital fondly, for the friendships that stood the test of time and on-call hardships! She continues to juggle the commitments of being a doctor, a mother, a wife, and the increased duties of SMA News Editor. She tries to keep time aside for herself and friends, both old and new.