



In Memory of Prof Tan Cheng Lim (1939–2019)

Text by Prof Ivy Ng, Group Chief Executive Officer, SingHealth
Photos by KK Women's and Children's Hospital

Prof Tan Cheng Lim, a well-respected pioneer in the field of paediatrics, passed away peacefully at home on the evening of 21 January 2019. It was a quiet and gentle passing, just as he was in life. It was with deep sadness that I, together with many who have been encouraged and mentored by him, came to terms with this.

Prof Tan graduated in medicine from the University of Singapore in 1964. He was awarded the Colombo Plan Fellowship to train in Paediatrics in Australia and obtained his postgraduate qualifications at the Royal Australasian College of Physicians in 1969. He received subspecialty training in paediatric haematology and oncology at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia. For over two decades, Prof Tan headed the Singapore General Hospital's (SGH) Government Department of Paediatrics, then largest paediatric department in Singapore, and was instrumental in its transformation to be the foundation for a children's hospital when KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) opened in 1997. He was appointed KKH's Chairman of the Division of Medicine from 1999 to 2002, and Emeritus Consultant and Associate Dean from 2004.

He was appointed leadership roles on numerous committees,

some of which include: Chairman, Expert Committee on Immunisation, Ministry of Health; President, Singapore Paediatric Society; and Chairman, Chapter of Paediatricians, Academy of Medicine, Singapore. He was also a member of the Singapore Medical Council Complaints Panel, KKH Ethics Committee and SingHealth Institutional Review Board, among others.

The many awards conferred upon Prof Tan are a testament to his dedication to public healthcare and community service. Some of these awards include the Albert Lim Award (1983), Public Administration Medal (Silver) (1984), Ruth Wong Award (1987), Kim Seng Community Clinic Long Service Awards (1996 and 2003), Singapore Children's Society Long Service Awards (1998, 2001, 2003 and 2008), Healthcare Humanity Award (2004) and the SingHealth Distinguished Golden Achievement Award (2013). In 2010, Prof Tan was also conferred the SMA Honorary Membership, the highest honour that SMA can bestow. Additionally, the Tan Cheng Lim – CCF Professorship in Paediatric Oncology was established in his name in 2015.

Prof Tan is warmly remembered with gratitude and fondness. In his many years of service as a clinical professor at the National University

of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, it is no doubt that he positively influenced and impacted the lives of many young medical students and aspiring paediatricians.

He exemplified the dedicated educator long before we recognised clinician educators or defined "protected time" and teaching honorariums. As a medical student, together with my fellow clinical group mates, I remember how he would diligently meet us and

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patiently tutor us in the intricacies of the care of a child with acute leukaemia. Later, as an inexperienced paediatric trainee, I still shiver at the remembrance of the weekly grand teaching rounds (or “clown shows” as we nervously called them), where we would make “clowns” of ourselves as we struggled to answer Prof Tan’s concise yet difficult questions. Despite our fumbling and thick-headedness, he always remained kind and patient while still exacting high standards from us all.

When I spent two years away in the US as a fellow training in medical genetics, he would take time to write me a letter every month to encourage and update me on the department’s activities. That blue aerogramme letter with his neat distinctive writing was always a welcome sight.

When I returned with some bright but, at that time, very unconventional ideas like setting up a national registry for thalassaemia and a DNA Diagnostic and Research Laboratory, he gave strong support and helped me as a young associate consultant (or senior registrar as we were called then) make the case to the then Director of Medical Services, Dr Chen Ai Ju, and the SGH Medical Board so we could hire the first scientific officer in a clinical department.

Like many others, when I became a consultant, I started toying with the idea of leaving the public service and joining the private sector. I remember how Prof Tan spoke to me and reminded me of how much more we can impact patient care when we stay in public service. He shared that a single clinician could help care for maybe 50 patients a day, but as a leader of a department, you could multiply the impact to many more patients when the right culture and policies are in place. Needless to say, I was compelled by his reasoning and have tried to follow in his footsteps to do my best in public service.

I know his impact and influence was wide and



all whose lives were touched by him were inspired to do the right thing with passion and integrity. When he stepped down from official leadership positions, he continued to play an active part as a mentor and encourager to many. I was certainly one of the fortunate ones to get his regular messages of greeting and uplifting.

There are so many memories of the lessons I’ve learnt from Prof Tan, but one that stuck and has defined my approach to patient care comes from an incident during one of the grand rounds. It was a busy day in the paediatric wards and in the middle of the grand round, a particularly anxious and demanding mother of a patient came to him to complain about her child’s abdominal pain. This mother had been trying to a number of us and we expected Prof Tan to send her away with one of us juniors to deal with her issues, but what he did next spoke louder than any lessons he could have taught us. He interrupted the round and went with her, all of us in tow, and attentively listened while she poured

all her woes and concerns on him. He examined the child and patiently reassured the mother.

Prof, you have always had patients at the heart of all you do. You have left us but your memory will be held close and dear. We will continue to strive to build on the strong foundations you have laid and press on towards better care and outcomes for our patients. ♦

Legend

1. Photo of Prof Tan for a Festschrift in honour of him in 2014
2. Prof Tan and Prof Ivy Ng with a team of doctors at the KKH Department of Paediatrics' Christmas Party 2004