

Dr JMJ Supramaniam

A MAN OF RESILIENCE AND FAITH – PERSPECTIVE FROM A SON

Interview by Dr Toh Han Chong

Photos by
Dato Paul Supramaniam

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A minister's son

Dr Toh Han Chong (THC): Thanks for hosting us in your beautiful home for this interview, Paul. Tell us about your father when he was a child – his background, heritage and his experience growing up?

Dato Paul Supramaniam (PS): Certainly, Han Chong. It's a pleasure to meet you. My father's childhood actually had a very big bearing on him and taught him to live his life based on his convictions – something he learnt from his father. Our ancestry can be traced back to Ceylon, Jaffna in the north, where the family had lived since the early 1200s. My paternal great grandfather came across to Singapore in the 1880s after she became a Crown colony.

My father was born in Kuala Lumpur (KL) in 1921, when the borders between Malaya and Singapore were more fungible. His upbringing was fairly peripatetic, because his father, Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam, was a Methodist minister, the headmaster of Methodist schools in both countries, a community leader and a district superintendent, who was serving at different times in Singapore, KL, Penang, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan.

If I had to define my father's childhood, I would say that it was one of considerably forced resilience. The reason for that is that he never knew his mother. My father told me that he had no memory whatsoever of his mother, except that he believes he has some subconscious memory of being hugged by her.

My father was orphaned at 15, when my grandfather suddenly died, primarily from overwork, although the medical records say the cause of death was "cerebellum thrombosis". The rich infusion of character, responsibility, strong values of service to mankind, and the conviction that life was meant to be lived for others, of which my father got from his father, was very strong.

The medical career

THC: It is well known that he loved literature, history and reading, and these traits passed down to the children. What compelled him to go into medicine?

PS: My father's elder brother, George, went to medical school in 1933 on

Dr James Mark Jeyasebasingam Supramaniam, or Dr JMJ Supramaniam for short, was a pioneer in the local management and elimination of tuberculosis, and was among those who developed Tan Tock Seng Hospital from a chest hospital to a general one. Earlier this month, a book titled *He Saved Thousands: The Story of JMJ Supramaniam* was launched to document his biography.

SMA News is privileged to speak with his son, Dato Paul Supramaniam, to gain a more personal perspective about his childhood, career and contributions to local medicine, as well as his harrowing experiences during the war.

– Dr Tan Yia Swam, Editor

a scholarship; he was an academic exhibitor and president of the medical college union in 1938 and 1939.

My father wanted to do literature but his immediate elder sister, Grace, was offered a scholarship to the medical school. The Federated Malay States (FMS) only gave two scholarships per family for medicine, and Grace said to my father, "You have the potential, you are a bright boy. I'm going to get married and I'll not be able to contribute as much in medicine as you can, so I'm going to give up my scholarship on the basis that you go and do medicine." So she persuaded him, as did George and another elder brother, Robert, that he should do medicine. So out of duty and because his sister gave up the scholarship, he took the FMS scholarship to medical school which he was awarded in 1939.

The war years

THC: Perhaps share some insights into your father during those war years. I understand that he was acknowledged as a hero during the war.

PS: He joined the British Medical Auxiliary literally a day or two after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Later, in an interview with the National Archives, he was asked about that and he said that he was compelled to enlist as he felt a duty within himself. He worked under fire as a stretcher bearer and medical orderly to evacuate the wounded. When the Japanese's attack on Singapore was in full force, he volunteered to lead the Christian burial of Yoong Tat Sin during the time of heavy Japanese shelling.

THC: Who was Yoong Tat Sin?

PS: He was a medical student who had been killed, I believe, during the bombing of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) earlier that morning. While they were out burying him that evening, the Japanese mistook the burial party for Indian soldiers and started to shell them severely. My father was hit by the shelling despite diving into the open trench and two people next to him died instantly – one was hit in the heart. My father thought that he had lost his leg and would soon die from the bleeding. Tan Chee Khoo, who witnessed it, shouted to him from the top of the medical college, "James, come up, come up, you're still alive." And so he was able

to crawl and hop up on one leg back to Sepoy Lines, where he passed out.

Mr Day did emergency surgery on my father, assisted by the head of surgery, Prof Eric Mekie, who wanted to amputate his leg to save his life, but K Shanmugaratnam, who was a medical student assisting in the theatre, said, "No, we must save his leg. He's a champion athlete." There was a permanent hole in his calf, but my father survived. No gangrene set in. The next day, the British surrendered and within two to three days, they were given instructions by the Japanese to evacuate the general hospital in Sepoy Lines to Miyako, the Woodbridge Hospital.

They were not allowed to take anything, including medicines, with them. The Japanese sentries kept watch, but my father realised that the British prisoners of war were going to need medical supplies. As he was on a stretcher under a blanket, he volunteered for his fellow medical students to strap the medicines and syringes onto his body and said, "If I get discovered, it'll just be one person killed. But if I get through, there'll be a huge amount of medication and stuff that we can get across to Miyako Hospital and then to the British." Because he was tall, lots of medicines, syringes and medical supplies were strapped to him under the blanket.

He passed the sentries and was put on a Japanese military truck; he prayed throughout the journey. The Japanese stopped to search the truck, but they never lifted his blanket and the medicines and essential equipment got through. If they had lifted the blanket, it would have been instant death for him

as they would have bayoneted him on the spot. For his gallantry, he received a medal from King George after the war.

Medical training

THC: Did your father spend any time overseas doing medical specialist training?

PS: Yes, he did. After the war, 28 individuals were picked by the British government from across the various ministries and departments in Singapore to be sent off for Malayanisation. Two of which were doctors – my father and Dr Yeoh Seang Aun. My father wanted to do obstetrics and gynaecology and had been picked to do that, but at the last minute, the colonial authorities asked, "Tuberculosis (TB) is a major killer, will you go and do that instead?" and he agreed.

THC: Was your father a young doctor at the time you were born?

PS: I was born in 1957 in Edinburgh when he was there as part of Malayanisation working with Prof John Crofton, a TB world authority.

He left in 1955 to do internal medicine in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Wales, and by 1957, he had already completed his FRFPS (Glasgow), MRCP Edinburgh and Tuberculous Diseases Diploma (Wales), and also worked in hospitals in Edinburgh and London. His progression was very fast; he started late but he accelerated quickly. By 1958, he was one of the early local heads of department in the medical services, under the British.

THC: Your father famously said, "To know TB is to know medicine", just as Sir William Osler had previously said, "To know syphilis is to know





medicine". What did he mean by this? Given that he was one of the pioneers in TB here and Singapore was then a great leader in TB treatment, tell us about the times he was part of the leading team in the war against TB.

PS: I was too young when he started leading this campaign, but I gleaned insights from several publications he published in 1958 about TB treatment. His knowledge of TB treatment was cutting edge at that time. The world authority was Prof Crofton in Edinburgh, whom my father had the privilege of studying with and then working with. Back then, it was normal for one to head off just to get their specialist qualifications and then come back, but my mother joined him and got pregnant with me!

THC: You're a Scottish pregnancy. (chuckles)

PS: Yes, but my mother had a very difficult time. Early in the pregnancy, she had a fall while on holiday with her mother. She was then hospitalised for many months and regarded as unstable to travel. My father was summoned back by the colonial secretary after completing his training. He said, "If I come back, my wife would have to stay behind alone because if she travels back, she will lose the baby. So can I stay back and work with Crofton till the baby is born in March or April 1957?"

Ultimately, the colonial secretary agreed and my father had the privilege of working as a specialist



doctor in Edinburgh and at the Brompton Hospital in London. He also did a short stint at Moorfields Eye Hospital because he wanted to learn more about ophthalmology.

So I think when he said, "to know TB is to know medicine", it was because he was a firm believer that TB could be prevented. He also believed that it could be treated, not just medically but with hearts and minds. That goes back to Sir William Osler. His research on TB with Prof Crofton and Prof Wallace Fox (who later came to be acknowledged himself as a world authority) also contributed to his belief. Lastly, he knew that TB could affect every organ and manifest in many ways. It tested doctors' intellect, intuition and medical skills of not just one organ. If you were a TB doctor, you had to know the whole body system. You couldn't just say you're a liver specialist or a brain specialist – but a complete physician.

Giving his best as a doctor

THC: It's quite illuminating for readers to realise that world-class clinical research, like the work done by your father and his colleagues, actually occurred at that time here in Singapore.

PS: In fact, Sir Tom Blundell FRS, former chief scientist in the UK and now a science advisor to the Singapore Government, once said that the work done in TB by my father, with emphasis on clinical research, was the foundation for today's Singapore self-belief in medical research.

As a child, I remember my father saying that the rest of the world thinks that we can't do world-class research here, but we've done it with TB, and he became a world authority and special advisor to the World Health Organization in 1964. He was in Geneva for a very long time through 1964 and helped to set up medical services in African countries, Taiwan and India. He really believed that we had the skills and resilience, and he knew what he could do as he was respected on the world stage.

He believed that medicine had a bigger role than to simply dispense medicine and heal people. He believed that some ailments could be prevented with better social policies, diets and exercise, and he also believed in the strength of medicine for international diplomacy. He was already practising a form of diplomacy for Singapore when he went to Geneva in 1964, because we were part of Malaysia and had no foreign service. He was out there as a voice for Singapore. He believed that medicine had that wider role and it gave one very strong skills that were portable at the government sphere.

Beyond just work

THC: I also want to focus on his multifaceted talents. Tell us more about his talents in sports and other areas?

PS: In university, he was captain of the athletics and soccer teams (despite injuring his leg during the war); he was a champion athlete who held the Keith Cup (after Dr Chan Ah Kow), and he ran

in the Amateur Athletics Association's meets in Singapore and Selangor. As a young doctor, he also played league soccer, hockey and badminton. He was part of the first ever students' union in 1949 when King Edward College and Raffles College merged. As a student leader and a leader of the King Edward College Union, he became the first vice-president of the combined Students' Union of the University of Malaya. He was a great lover of poetry, history, literature and music. He listened extensively to classical music in Singapore and when he was in Europe he would travel to hear famous conductors like Wilhelm Furtwangler. He made me and my siblings learn music when we were kids, and even encouraged my mother to pick up violin!

THC: He was truly a renaissance man. As a young boy, you must have seen a very busy father.

PS: I hardly saw him, except for the occasional tennis lesson at night, and possibly briefly on weekends. Even then, he worked on Saturdays.

THC: What was the driving spirit of your father? What were some of the principles that he lived by?

PS: Firstly, Christian values; putting others before self, and serving God and the country would very much epitomise the values that he held. He also always believed that whatever you do, do it quietly. What you do with the right hand, the left hand should not know.

My father also wanted the upliftment of the Indians and Malays, because that's what his father had done and also because of his own strong belief in the common man. I recall that when I was a child, many of the hospital dressers, nurses, hospital porters and ambulance drivers were Malay and Indian. Occasionally, after playing tennis on Saturday evenings after working all day in his office, he'd come home to them waiting for him. He would then change into a sarong and a singlet, and would sit with them in the garden and drink sweet tea. The satay man would also come and make satay for them. He did this because he wanted them to be able to talk to him about their real problems, he talked to them in Tamil or Malay.

THC: That's amazing.

The Supramaniam family

THC: What's life like in the Supramaniam family?

PS: The holidays were interesting, but because he was always busy, we didn't have many vacations with him. There was one very memorable time back in 1965 or 1966 when we went up to Cameron Highlands and stayed at Cluny Lodge, a rest house that was the property of the Singapore Government and available to senior people. My father wanted to spend time with us and he invited my cousins along too and drove us all up. There was also a Government holiday house in Changi that was available for senior people, and we'd occasionally go there for the holidays.

Every year until his passing, we visited my maternal grandfather (JMJ's father-in-law) in Ceylon. As children, we also once visited my father's old stomping ground: Edinburgh. He took me to the Royal Infirmary, to Arthur's Seat, and to where Sir John Crofton lived.

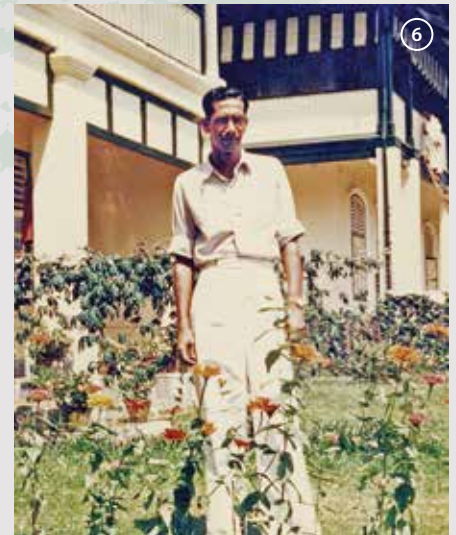
THC: How was he as a father? Perhaps share with us some memories of him?

PS: I have some good memories of my father.

When I was five, I had a very sudden onset of severe appendicitis which caused terrible acute pain. My mother thought it was indigestion and said, "No, it'll be fine." At about four o'clock that afternoon, I was literally in tears and I said to her, "Can daddy come home and see me?" She called him and gave him the symptoms; he came straight home, felt my tummy, lifted me, put me into the car and drove straight to the General Hospital where they operated on me immediately, saving my life. Throughout the night, after the surgery, I kept getting up and he was there, sitting next to me and holding my hand.

THC: Thank you so much, Paul. Excellent insights into your father; truly one of Singapore's finest doctors and sons. Thank you. ♦

This print copy barely scratches the tip of what we gleaned from the interview. For more insights into Dr JMJ Supramaniam's lifetime of accomplishments and contributions, visit <http://bit.ly/2kvqNbX>.



Legend

1. The family at their Berrima Road home (circa mid-1960s)
2. JMJ leading his team to yet another relay victory
3. JMJ as a champion athlete in medical college (1947)
4. "A doctor's doctor – cerebral, kind, compassionate and humble..." – Prof John Wong, CEO of National Healthcare Singapore, speaking of Dr JMJ Supramaniam (2018)
5. JMJ as a chest physician in Tan Tock Seng Hospital
6. JMJ as a young doctor outside his hospital quarters
7. Dato Paul and Dr Toh Han Chong at Supramaniam Residence

Dr Toh is a senior consultant, clinician-scientist and deputy medical director at the National Cancer Centre Singapore. He was former Editor of SMA News. Dr Toh wanted to be a writer, architect or film director as a child but veered towards Medicine in the end. No regrets though.

