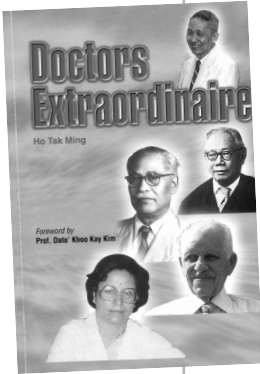


A Review of "Doctors Extraordinaire"

By Dr Wong Heck Sing



The book "Doctors Extraordinaire" can be purchased online through http://www.dts-web.com/drs_extraordinaire/order.html. The cost is RM35.00 for the book, and an additional RM10.00 for postage in Malaysia and Singapore. For more information, please contact the author, Dr Ho Tak Ming at doctor@dts-web.com.

Dr Ho Tak Ming is to be congratulated on writing a most interesting and readable book. His "Doctors Extraordinaire" describes the inspiring and out-of-the-ordinary lives and work of some 18 doctors and 1 dental surgeon.

I was privileged to have known some of them - Dr A. A. Sandosham, my Professor of Biology, who taught me in my first year medical course. I also knew Dr. R. Sathiah, Founder President of the College of General Practitioners of Malaysia, and Dr A. W. E. Moreira who later succeeded him. I, in my capacity as the Singapore College of General Practitioners' President, met Drs Sathiah and Moreira several times.

As the author mentioned, Professor Sandosham loved to make his students, especially the female students, uncomfortable by telling them the facts of life very bluntly. He only relented when the female students began squirming and blushing in their seats. But in telling the facts of life, he was really preparing them for the day when they became doctors. Doctors cannot afford to be embarrassed if they are to get all the necessary information,

including intimate details, from their patients in order to treat them correctly.

Dr Wu Lien-Teh, or Dr Gnoh Lean Tuck, as he was known in Ipoh, needed no introduction. Dr Wu's fame as the world-renowned plague authority for his outstanding work in China, was known far and wide.

I was surprised to learn from Dr Ho's book that one of the Malaysian doctors, Dr Khong Kam Tak or K. T. Khong, is a direct descendant of the sage Confucius. He is also the grandfather of Dr Khong Kok Sun, a senior orthopaedic surgeon who used to practise at the Alexandra Hospital in Singapore and the 74th direct descendant of Confucius (see accompanying article by Dr Khong K. S. - Editor).

However, the book failed to mention another "doctor extraordinaire": Dr T. J. Danaraj, a Malaysian, who started from scratch and single-handedly established the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Malaysia. Other omissions included Dr M. Mahathir, the present and longest serving Prime Minister of Malaysia. Another notable omission is Dr Tan Chee Koon. He served for many years in the Malaysian Parliament, and his views were greatly respected.

I was also surprised to read of Dr L. Braddon's work on beriberi, and that he was opposed by the famous Sir Patrick Manson, who firmly believed that beriberi was caused by an infection. Dr Braddon believed that beriberi was due to eating white polished rice, although the reason advanced by him was erroneous. He thought white rice contained a toxin and so he tried to find an antidote to the poison.

The bravery of the Kathigasus was inspiring.

Another doctor, Dato Dr S. Underwood was a truly remarkable man. His generosity in helping needy students through his Dato Dr S. Underwood Fund was highly commendable.

The author included a dental surgeon for good measure although what the latter did was nothing outstanding or remarkable. Since the book is called "Doctors Extraordinaire", Dr Ho should have included only those who made a significant impact or contribution to Malaysia.

Editor's Note:

The book reviewer, Dr Wong Heck Sing (MBBS 1952), is a retired family physician, a Honorary SMA Member and a past President of the College of Family Physicians. ■



From left, the writer, Kit Yew, Kit Soon and Kit Thong on the writer's father's 80th birthday in May 2001.

DESCENDANTS OF A CONFUCIAN CONSCIENCE

by Dr Khong Kok Sun

I was asked to write this piece following the publication of the book "Doctors Extraordinaire" by Ipoh general practitioner Dr Ho Tak Ming. Although I did hail from that small town, I was not featured - except in one of the photographs in the chapter showing 3 generations of doctors including my grandfather, Dato Dr Khong Kam Tak,

who was one of the pioneers in modern medicine in Ipoh and the person featured. The second was my father and the third was myself as a pre-schooler. That was how I was "traced" by the Editor. The connection with Confucius was that we are direct descendants of the venerable sage.

KHONG KAM TAK

This book is reviewed in another article and clearly relates the life of my grandfather in the chapter "A Confucian Conscience". He was the 74th descendant of the sage and born on 30 December 1884 and was one of the first students of Anglo-Chinese School, Ipoh. He received his medical training in Cambridge University, England, and was both private practitioner and a

volunteer Medical Superintendent of a maternity hospital for 30 years. He stopped practising Medicine around 1961 after my father (his son) took over the clinic. I remember him as a strict gentleman who spoke the Queen's English and who played "fast" mahjong. He had a ruler to line up his mahjong wall and often used it to rap the knuckles of those beside him who were a bit too slow for his liking! He is reputed to have changed the history of modern Singapore because he "saved the life" of a 21-year old cub reporter Wee Kim Wee who was assigned to Ipoh by the *Straits Times* in 1936. The future President of Singapore suffered from mental stress from his new job and was medically advised by my grandfather to take a

◀ Page 6 – A Review of “Doctors Extraordinaire” long rest back in Singapore, after which he recovered and moved on to history.

Just before he died at the age of 89, he was warded in Tan Tock Seng Hospital for tuberculosis. I remember visiting him there when I was a first-year medical student. I had just started my Physiology and he asked me the meaning of “vasoactive”. At that time, I had only learned of “vasoconstriction” and “vasodilatation” and told him I did not know. He frowned and told me what it was. That was my grandfather who had stopped practising medicine 40 years ago!

THE SON, DR KHONG KIT YEW

My father, Dr Khong Kit Yew, moved the whole family down to Singapore in a Mini Minor in 1962 when I was a Primary 3 student. He joined the Ministry of Health and was assigned as Medical Officer to Trafalgar Home for lepers and ultimately became Senior Registrar. At that time, there was only one dermatologist who was also the Medical Superintendent of TH. Nobody wanted to work in the leprosarium. After joining the hospital my father never asked for posting out as he knew it was difficult to find another doctor to work there. He was highly respected by staff and patients and is still active in SILRA (Singapore Leprosy Relief Association) activities. After his retirement, he became interested in our lineage. Together with his brother Kit Soon, former PUB Water Chief and Principal of Ngee Ann Polytechnic, a third brother, Kit Thong, in Kuala Lumpur and a cousin in Perth, began to search for our lineage records.

Kit Soon searched the Internet and managed to obtain the list from Shanghai University Library. In it are the middle names assigned to 85 generations of the Confucius clan. Every 10 generations were given names by the Chinese emperors of the day, but the Kuomintang took it upon themselves to give the last 15! We found out that 3 generations in our family, myself included, had the wrong middle name. This was because my great-grandfather had come out to Malaya as a boy with his uncle and thus lost touch with his clansmen. Hence his descendants were born with new generation-names. This

has now been corrected in the 77th generation for my son and his nephews. This lineage was recently reconfirmed when I met an expatriate nurse in Alexandra Hospital, Kong Ruixue, who is also a 76th descendant of the sage from Confucius’ hometown of Qifu in Shandong province. This unique “identifier” allows me to boast of a blood link with the gold medallist of the Men’s Table Tennis in the Sydney Olympics, Kong Linghui, who I can claim to be a cousin as my generation’s middle name is Ling.

My father retired from Civil Service in 1981. He and my mother played competition bridge and represented Singapore. He also plays a mean game of golf with a handicap that went as low as 14. He just celebrated his 80th birthday and to recover from it, promptly made his way down to Perth for its solitude and (girl)friends. The family ties are strong in the Confucian tradition with the brothers and a sister (wife of the late Speaker of Parliament Dr Yeoh Ghim Seng) visiting their eldest sister in an old folk’s home without fail every weekend. This eldest sister, Soh Gaik, recently passed away at the age of 87 years.

THE GRANDSON

My life did not follow any ancestral stars considering that I basically floated into things, which were to shape it. In fact my mother was instrumental in making me successful in Singapore swimming (by driving my sister and I to the pool twice a day for 3 - 4 years). No one pushed me into Medicine, least of all my father, but I got into medical class in Pre-U because I could not make it into the better science classes. During full-time NS, I wanted to join the SAF until I was given a place in Medicine and got disrupted.

I felt my calling only in Pre-Clinical years when direct contact with patients and my teachers firmed my path towards clinical practice. My keenness to work with hands (as opposed to brains) took me on a surgical career, thinking I was to be a world-famous heart transplant surgeon. However a light bulb came on when I was a trainee under Drs Tong G On and Tay Boon Keng in Tan Tock Seng Hospital, who showed me there was more to

life than operating. Taking up orthopaedics was less stressful, more “ful-filling” up with good food, had great camaraderie, and allowed me to indulge in playing with the toys, oops... the tools, I mean, of the trade.

I developed a principle to keep medical politics from my life and when I found least of it in Alexandra Hospital, that was where I chose to practise for 18 straight years - except for my HMDP at the Mayo Clinic. I was able to follow some of Confucius’ principles (though I did not make a conscious effort to do so) and could evaluate the medical scene from a distance. Those who worked in this last bastion of true public service were secluded by choice from increasing healthcare costs (and take-home salary) and to deliver good, logical and cost-effective medicine to those who could least afford it. With the restructuring of AH in October 2000 and its competing head-on with all the other hospitals, health practice focus changed and it became business practice to administrators. We felt that the “cheese had moved”, and so did many of us. In a more elaborate article coming out later, I will expand on how doctors in general can rethink their position in a fast-changing world by adopting the teachings of Confucius and other philosophers and physicians who had formulated clear policies as long as five thousand years ago. Meanwhile, suffice to say that I have imbibed many of the values practised and lived by my grandfather and father. Whether through nature or nurture, I am eternally grateful to them for keeping me on the narrow path of ethical medicine as I feel it should be practised even today. ■

Editor’s Note:

Dr Khong graduated from University of Singapore in 1977 and practised Orthopaedics mostly in Alexandra Hospital until his resignation in March 2001. He is Commanding Officer of a Combat Support Hospital and is still active in NS. He is currently Advanced Specialty Training (Orthopaedics) Programme Director and is faculty member of the Swiss AO/ASIF organisation. In his spare time, he tries to improve his golf game. He can be contacted at Email: kskhong@orthopods.net



The writer as a young child learning from grandfather sifu the art of accuracy in surgery.