

DR BENJAMIN CHEW

1907-1994

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Dr Benjamin Chew was born in Malacca in 1907 and relocated to Singapore in 1910 at Geylang Road. He was the son of Ms Tan Siok Kim, the first teacher of MGS Malacca, and Mr Chew Cheng Yong, teacher of ACS Singapore. In 1912 to 1922, he studied at the ACS Singapore, completing his Senior Cambridge Examination at the age of fifteen with Distinctions and Scholarship. He transferred to Raffles Institution in 1922 and spent three months together with Benjamin Sheares. He had been a boyhood friend of Benjamin Sheares and attended the same church at Bras Basah Road, the Bethesda Church, and indeed was baptised together with him.

At the age of fifteen he entered the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1923. That batch included Benjamin Sheares and Ernest Monteiro. He topped the final examination with Dr Benjamin Sheares in March 1929 and was awarded the Bailey Medal. Posted to Penang General Hospital in 1929, he married his neighbour, Miss Oh Hock Neo in 1930. And then he was posted to General Hospital, Outram Road in 1930-1942. He became assistant to Dr VH Norris, Dr V Landor, Professor Brunei Hawes and later Professor G Ransome.

In 1931, he set up the first clinical laboratory at General Hospital where his team diagnosed the first case of Bubonic plague. During the war he was head of the Medical Unit at the Yio Chu Kang Mental Hospital, at that time known as the Miyako Byoin.

In 1943-1945 he was head of one of the two Medical Units in Tan Tock Seng Hospital, at that time known as Hakuai Byoin, and indeed he gave the first penicillin injection in Singapore in 1945 to Dr Clarence Smith, a colleague of his. He resigned from Government Service in 1946 following disagreement with policy of British Military Administration's chief administrator Col R Walkingshaw. Although he was appointed to start the Medical Unit at the Singapore General Hospital and he was awarded the fellowship for MRCP, he was not allowed to treat his many tuberculosis patients at Tan Tock Seng Hospital and he was refused by the Colonial administration to have a unified medical service for both local and colonial doctors. In 1946 he started private practice at United Pharmacy at 305 North Bridge Road. He was principal founder of Singapore Anti Tuberculosis Association (SATA) in 1947 with some concerned doctors and businessmen. His policy was to treat poor and rich patients alike.

He is survived by his wife and four children – Dr Chew

Chin Hin, former Master of Academy of Medicine and Deputy Director of the Medical Services, at present Chairman of National Medical Ethics Committee and Deputy Director and Advisor of School of Postgraduate Medical Studies; daughter Tan Ai Lin, Mrs David Tan, former teacher now residing in Tasmania; Mr James Chew, a Missionary with Navigators; Prof Ernest Chew, Professor of History and Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Dr Benjamin Chew was the oldest Medical Graduate until he passed away at the age of 87. He was the life member of the Medical Alumni Association, Singapore Medical Association and the British Medical Association. All throughout his life he had been more associated with evangelical Christian groups in Singapore. His integrity, enthusiasm for life, his work among young people has been legendary. His was an example many would desire to follow. Dr Kwa Soon Bee, Permanent Secretary Health and Director of Medical Services said "Dr Benjamin Chew... has led a exemplary life as a Doctor and a devout Christian. His contribution to the church and medical practice in Singapore will be long remembered. He was greatly missed by all of us who have the privilege of knowing him."

He counts among his friends, many great international figures as well as local dignitaries. They praise his compassion, dedication and his service at the funeral.

In his biography, Mr Dhanabalan has this to say of him. "To me Dr Chew is a good example of the verse in 1 Corinthians 13 which says "Love has no limits to his faith, his hope and his endurance". He has great capacity to trust people. He does not lose hope or faith in the good nature... He was prepared to stand his ground, but when it comes to judging people, he is very careful not to say anything that will hurt or damage them. These are the two things which I admire in him."

A self-taught accomplished pianist, his passion for music is well known.

His exemplary life dispels the cynicism and distrust of many who may have lost faith in fellow man and perhaps the medical profession.

I deeply appreciated my deep friendship with him. We have worked together in several ministries.

We thank God for his life.

DR KHOO OON TEIK