

Citation on Benjamin Henry Sheares

21st Benjamin Henry Sheares Memorial Lecture, 28 August 2009, Marina Mandarin

Dr Suresh Nair, President of Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of Singapore

We all are gathered here tonight to commemorate a great man, Professor Benjamin Henry Sheares, a great teacher, a great obstetrician and gynaecologist, innovator, scientist and a mentor to a great many prominent Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in Singapore and the region who have endeavoured to follow in the footsteps of this great leader.

Dr Benjamin Henry Sheares, son of Edwin H Sheares and Lillian J Gomez, was born into a Eurasian family on 12 August 1907 in Singapore. He married Yeo Seh Geok, a midwifery student and they had two sons, Joseph and Edwin, and one daughter, Constance.

Dr BH Sheares was educated at the Methodist School, St Andrew's School and Raffles Institution – which was the only school equipped with laboratories for the teaching of the sciences. In 1923, he enrolled into the King Edward VII College of Medicine (KECOM), Singapore and qualified as a doctor in 1929 at the tender age of 21. His academic performance was outstanding and he was awarded four medals by his college and passed his Obstetrical and Gynaecological final examinations with distinction. He was also awarded one of only 3 scholarships offered by the Council of the Medical College to medical and dental students.

He began his career in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in April 1931 when he transferred to the KECOM Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the Singapore General Hospital at the request of its Professor, JS English because of Dr Sheares' distinction pass in the examinations. In 1937, he was posted by Professor English to be in charge of all obstetric patients in the Kandang Kerbau Hospital.

In April 1947, Dr Sheares took up a 2-year Queen's fellowship at the Royal Post Graduate School at the Hammersmith Hospital and after only 6 months' attachment, passed the Membership to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (MRCOG) examinations in 1948 and was the first Singaporean to achieve this.

Sir Eardley Holland, Chairman of the Board of MRCOG Examiners, had said in 1950; "I was much impressed by your personality and learning and by the wide range of your long experience when I had pleasure of meeting you in London and examining you for the MRCOG at which you attained the top marks of all candidates." This led to the decision of a committee of British specialists meeting in London where Dr Sheares was their choice of full time Professor in Obstetrics and Gynecology from January 1951 – the first Singaporean to be appointed Professor of a department.

Professor Sheares reduced the high mortality rates by introducing measures to upgrade antenatal supervision and pioneered a system of maternal and childcare clinics all linked centrally to the Kandang Kerbau Hospital. Another reason for the lowered maternal mortality rate was attributed by Prof Sheares to safer surgical management in Obstetrics especially the Lower Segment Caesarean Section which he pioneered in Singapore for difficult labour.

In spite of his heavy clinical schedule, Prof Sheares had published 29 papers, all single authored, commencing in June 1940 and spanning 24 years – no mean feat in an era where most of his peers and colleagues had neither the time nor inclination to publish clinical papers nor perform research.

In 1952, he obtained the Doctor in Medicine (MD) from the University of Malaya in Singapore for his doctorate thesis, "A statistical study of congenital anomalies of the female genitalia in Singapore with special reference to incidence, types of anomalies, etiology based on economic status and the incidence of these anomalies in infertility, abortions and dystocia". This received international recognition in the year book of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in the 1953 to 1954 series and in Dr Lee's Textbook of Obstetrics.

He pioneered several original operative procedures but his greatest achievement was the "Sheares Operation" for the construction of the vagina in cases of congenital vaginal atresia. He succeeded where all others had failed in this type of operation because of the common problem scarring and fibrosis as he had recognised that this anomaly had wider connective tissues planes laterally and he emulated nature by working backwards in keeping with the

stages of embryological development allowing normal external epithelium to creep up the double-barrelled tunnel so formed with division of the median tissue band thereafter.

As a leader of doctors, he was the 1st President of the Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of Singapore from 1960 to 1961 and also the 1st Chairman of the Chapter Obstetricians and Gynaecologists which he initiated in 1969. In 1966, at his urging, the Family Planning and Population Board was founded. Prof Sheares always initiated and promoted the importance of teaching and training in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. In March 1956, he started the Bulletin of KKH, the predecessor of the Singapore Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and was its first editor.

Prof Sheares' leadership qualities as well as his humanitarian and caring outlook was so well-recognised that he was called upon by the Government of Singapore to serve the nation as President of Republic of Singapore on 2 January 1971.

Prof Sheares was a very humble and caring doctor for even as the President of the Republic, he would come in to Kangang Kerbau Hospital and insisted that no protocol be observed when he visited the hospital to teach.

For his good work, achievements and in recognition as an all rounded medical practitioner he was:

- i. Given the Honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of Singapore in 1970
- ii. Awarded the Honorary Fellowship by the Royal Society of Medicine, England in 1974
- iii. Awarded the Honorary Fellowship by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in 1976
- iv. Made Honorary Knight of the Grand Order of Bath by Queen Elizabeth II

In honour of his distinguished career in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, marked by dynamism, innovative leadership and a vision of the future, the Benjamin Henry Sheares Lectureship was established in 1977. He is remembered in Singapore through the Sheares Hall in the National University of Singapore and the Benjamin Sheares Bridge in the city of Singapore.

On 12 May 1981, Professor Sheares died at the age of 74. Nearly 85,000 people turned up at the Istana to pay their last respects to Prof Benjamin Henry Sheares.

Today, we honour Professor Benjamin Henry Sheares in whose memory we will have the 21st Benjamin Henry Sheares Memorial Lecture entitled "'Fetal Cells in Maternal Blood - A Decade-Long Search for the Holy Grail'" delivered by A/Prof Mahesh Choolani.

Please rise and let us toast to a great man, brilliant teacher and compassionate doctor.

REFERENCES

Tan KH, Tay EH. The History of Obstetrics & Gynaecology in Singapore, Obstetrical & Gynaecological Society of Singapore & National Heritage Board 2003. Armour Publishing Pte Ltd. ISBN 981-4045-68-3