



The History of Geriatric Medicine in Malaysia

Preparing for the Silver Tsunami – How it all started in Malaysia

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In Malaysia, the mention of ‘geriatrics’ immediately conjures up the imagery of a healthy, robust, 93 year old Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed. In real terms, Malaysia has also come a long way from being a nation devoid of care for the older persons to one that is leading the developing nations in South East Asia in transforming geriatrics services. Malaysia will soon be an aged nation. According to the University of Malaya’s Social Wellbeing Research Centre, the number of Malaysians aged 60 years and above is projected to hit 3.5 million in 2020 and 6.3 million in 2040 — about 20 per cent of the total population!

Medical care for the older person requires distinct knowledge and skills to address the physical and social changes associated with ageing combined with disability from co-existing acute and chronic diseases. It was Malaysia’s own “Marjory Warren-equivalent” - the trio of Philip Poi, Lee Fatt Soon and P Srinivas who started the ball rolling for us. Health services in Malaysia are provided through two ministries- service-led hospitals administered by the Ministry of Health (MOH) while the teaching hospitals attached to public universities are administered by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Geriatrics services in both MOH and MOE hospitals developed hand-in-hand.

Our first professor of Geriatric Medicine, Philip Poi, received his undergraduate training at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and his Geriatric Medicine training at Oxford and St Bart’s, London. He returned to Malaysia in 1992 and together with Srinivas, pioneered the first ever purpose-built ward for acutely ill older patients at the University of Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) in 1999. The acute geriatrics ward was established in response to the rapid turn-over for all patients in the general medical wards which was barely 3 days – which meant even patients with stroke were discharged by the 3rd day. Older persons especially, were not afforded the opportunity to rehabilitate while family caregivers did not then obtain any requisite training¹. Readmissions together with complications of pressure sores and other geriatric syndromes became ubiquitous. The geriatrics unit was the product of a hard and long struggle to convince the hospital administrators with the strong support of the Dean of Faculty Medicine who at that time was also the Director of the hospital.

As a junior physician working in a small district hospital in Banting, a sleepy beachside town an hour’s drive from Kuala Lumpur, the young and determined Dr Lee Fatt Soon, fought gallantly and waited patiently for the opportunity to train in geriatric medicine. Together with Koh Wai Keat, they eventually succeeded in obtaining recognized training through attachments both at the UMMC and a fellowship abroad, paving the way for geriatric medicine subspecialty training in Malaysian. In 2001, the Ministry of Health announced their intention to set up geriatric services. Lee Fatt Soon together with another visionary youngster, Yau Weng Keong, joined forces in lobbying government support for their own agenda, which finally led to the establishment of the first MOH Geriatric Unit at the General Hospital Kuala Lumpur in 2003. The setting up of the unit meant the ‘hostile’ takeover of a gynecology ward including their staff members which meant the multi-disciplinary team needed to be developed from scratch. The toughest struggle was, however,

converting mindsets from a gynaecological approach to that of a geriatrics approach. The overnight switch from caring for mothers and babies to caring for older persons led to a serious case of mass delirium. Ward staff grappled with the deletion of last menstrual periods and replacement of per vaginal bleeds with bowel openings from their daily vocabulary. Lee and Yau continued to have to juggle heavy general medical workloads with training provision and service development for their geriatrics service. The staff-strapped medical department was, after all, unlikely to let go of valuable, well-trained general physicians in a hurry.

In addition, Lee and Yau also developed a curious sense of humour- gaining amusement from the universal bewilderment and negative perceptions that followed them and future physicians who chose to subspecialize in geriatric medicine. This 'comedic' duo became popular draws at national medical conferences- imparting pearls of wisdom on the care of older persons through a truly amicable, self-deprecating style. Finally, after two decades and the double miracle of a prime ministerial come back at the ripe old age of 93 years, the medical fraternity has eventually come to the realization that we are an ageing nation and doctors will have to be equipped with skills to treat older persons!

These were the stories of how the UMMC and GHKL became the first training centres for geriatrics, slowly but surely, thanks to the dogged determination and indomitable spirits of our founding fathers. An increasing number of budding geriatricians are now being trained year-on-year by rotating to both the UMMC and GHKL for at least 1.5 years and with a further 1.5 years in attachments to other geriatrics and relevant subspecialties in Malaysia as well as overseas. Geriatric services have begun to sprout in all other states in Malaysia- we now have geriatricians in 12 out of the 14 states in Malaysia delivered by 40 practicing geriatricians in Malaysia including the Federal Territory. These 40 geriatricians are distributed between public hospitals and the private sector. With about one-third of the geriatricians located in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, the geriatric services in public hospitals in all the other states comprise of stand-alone units run by single-handed geriatricians in individual states, operating with a limited number of beds or in integrated general medical wards. The current available geriatric services are, in fact, unable to meet even a fraction of the needs of the existing older population nationwide. The targetted figures of 0.5 to 0.85 geriatricians per 10, 000 population of older persons do currently seem intangible. We do hope, however, that the winds of political change will now provide renewed energy to finally propel the development of geriatric medicine in Malaysia. It is also time to make geriatric medicine "sexy" to undergraduates so as to imbibe the love and passion for the care of older persons early in their careers. In addition, there is also a dire need for capacity building within all healthcare workers, particular nurses and allied health professionals who are part of the "multi-disciplinary team" that makes geriatrics unique.

The Malaysian Society of Geriatric Medicine (MSGM), which was formed on 13th July 2012, has been aggressively promoting geriatric medicine, conducting training and coordinating surveys and research while collaborating with the government and other stakeholders in the implementation of national policies relevant to this field. Their decision to co-host the 1st World Congress on Falls and Postural Stability (WCFPS) with the British Geriatrics Society has greatly aided this effort. The WCFPS is supported by a generous grant from the Malaysian Convention Bureau, and recently helped a MSGM delegation gain a private audience with the Minister of Health which led to Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad conducting a media launch of the event, gaining valuable nationwide press and television coverage.

In a nutshell, the history of geriatrics in Malaysia can be paralleled to two rivers: MOHE and MOH, merging into a small sea which, we now hope, is now creating transformational waves towards becoming the ocean it needs to be. We are in for an exciting, thrilling journey to expand geriatrics services in Malaysia while we empower our older persons to embrace ageing. As Mahatma Gandhi has once said, "even a small body of determined spirit fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history".

For more information on the 1st World Congress on Falls and Postural Stability please visit: wcfps2019.org. Do tweet us on: @fallscongress; #wcfps2019.

References

1. Srinivas P, Poi PJH, Ebrahim S. Pattern of medical admissions among the elderly - a prospective review in University hospital, Kuala Lumpur. Med J Malaysia 1996;51 : 210-4. How do you see geriatric unit in 20 years to come.



Tun Dr Siti Hasmah – gracing the opening of the first ever purpose-build geriatric ward in University Malaya Medical Centre in 1999. Dr Srinivas (left) is seen explaining and briefing her about the ward.



Tun Dr Siti Hasmah- during her latest visit to UMMC during the International Day for Older Person (IDOP) 2018 – Looking on from left : Toh Puan Aishah Ong (Pro Chancellor University Malaya), Prof Shahrul Bahyah (Head of Medical Department), Prof Dr. Tunku Kamarul Zaman (Director, UMMC), Associate Prof Dr Nazirah (Deputy Director-Clinical- UMMC), Prof Chin Ai-Vyryn (Head of Unit-Geriatrics UMMC). Prof Philip Poi is seen getting an autograph of the geriatric icon!



Geriatricians are boring? You got it wrong! We know how to have fun too! The Multi-Disciplinary team of the UMMC geriatric unit comprising of staff nurses, dietitian, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physio therapists and doctors!



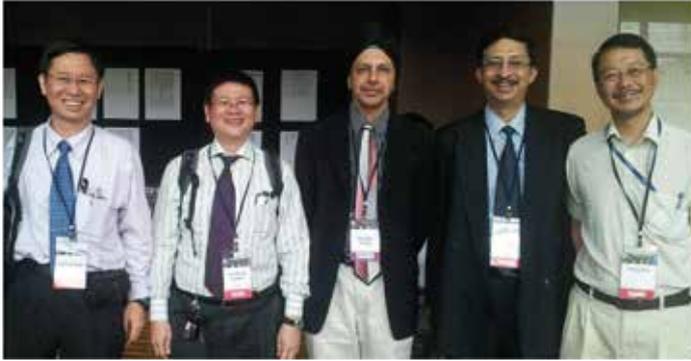
“SOS needed! Our gynae-turned geriatric nurses are delirious! And now, even our sleep-wake cycle is reversed!”
The General Hospital Kuala Lumpur (GHKL – from MOH) Geriatricians’ team : Making the best use of technology from left : Dr Elizabeth; Dr Alan Pok; Dr Lee Fatt Soon, the live wire of the team; Dr Yau Weng Keong and Dr Rizah



The pioneering team of doctors and nurses at the geriatric ward in GHKL.



The young and dashing Dr Yau WK, Prof Philip Poi and Dr Lee Fatt Soon (from left), taken at least one decade (or more) ago.



The "Malaysian-Marjory-Warren equivalent trio" with two other pioneering geriatricians. From left: Dr Lee Fatt Soon, Dr Yau WK, Dr Rajbans Singh, Prof Dr Srinivas and Prof Philip Poi. While looking after the older persons, they too have discovered the secrets of looking young it seems!



Dr Zulkefly Ahmad (centre), the current Minister of Health of Malaysia, unveils the 1st World Congress in Falls and Postural Stability at the Media Launch for the event in May this year. Looking on are (from left) Dr Devinder Kaur (Organizing co-chair, WCFPS 2019), Dr Yau Weng Keong (Lead Geriatrician, Ministry of Health) and (far right) Tan Maw Pin (organizing chair, WCFPS 2019)



A light moment after the 1st WCFPS 2019 media launch. From left Reena Nadarajah (geriatrics trainee), Khor Hui Min (geriatrician), Rosmaliah Alias (pharmacist), Muhammad Romli (occupational therapist), Tunku Muzafar (geriatrician), Yau Weng Keong (geriatrician), Izzati Saedon (geriatrician), Devinder Kaur (physiotherapist), Rizah Mazzuin (geriatrician), Elizabeth Chong (geriatrician) and Tan Maw Pin (geriatrician).