

# A Brief Introduction to the Early History of Surgery in Singapore (Part III)

Y K Lee

The year 1919 was an important landmark in the history of the medical school and medical services of Singapore. The medical school produced its first graduates in 1910, and in 1916, its diploma of Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (LMS) was recognised by the General Medical Council (GMC). But in July 1919, the general council of medical education and registration of the United Kingdom (to give the GMC its full name) sent a warning to the Government that if the standards of teaching and examination were not fully maintained, the Council would have to re-consider the recognition of the licence of the medical school. Falling standards were mainly due to the fact that very few members of the teaching staff were full-time and permanent, the rest were part-time teachers who were in private practice or in the army and they were changed often to the great detriment of the students. Other teachers were medical officers, some quite junior, in the government service. There was hardly any organised teaching.

This bombshell from the GMC was a blessing in disguise. It resulted in the medical school having a new building in College Road, and the raising of standards of teaching (the benefits of which can be seen in present-day Singapore and Malaysia).

On receipt of the stern warning from the GMC, the governor instructed the principal civil medical officer, Straits Settlements, the principal civil medical officer, Federated Malay States, and the principal of the medical school to consider the problem carefully and to come up with concrete proposals for improving the status of the school and the efficiency of its teaching.

They identified the problem as due to the following factors:

- (a) shortage of staff;
- (b) shortage of space (for lecture rooms, laboratories, library, hostel accommodation for senior students near the teaching hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital);
- (c) lack of facilities and equipment for practical work;
- (d) lack of specialised teaching.

And they made the following recommendations: To overcome the shortage of space, the solution was to provide new buildings. A new medical school building was suggested to remedy the deficiencies. A hostel at Tan Tock Seng Hospital was badly needed to supplement the insufficient hostel accommodation

and to enable the senior students to be on the spot for their clinical training.

Lack of facilities and equipment for practical work would be overcome by the provision of extra staff, extra buildings and adequate funds.

To overcome the shortage of staff and lack of specialised teaching, they recommended the creation of a number of full-time chairs, the professors to be paid on a scale that would attract and keep good men, and assure them the prestige properly enjoyed by staff of a good medical school. One of the chairs to be created was that of Professor of Surgery.

The proposals were put before the Legislative Council and were unanimously approved. The Director of Medical and Sanitary Services said at that meeting:

"...The filling of the appointments in connection with the school to which the Secretary of State has agreed ... should be of the greatest help to us in maintaining and improving it as a teaching body. I believe that with careful guidance and encouragement there should be a great future for the King Edward VII Medical School, and that in course of time it may become one of the most important, if not the most important, medical institutions in the Far East.

No arrangements have yet been possible for the institution of post-graduate study at the medical school and hospitals of Singapore. I am very anxious that this should be done since the facilities for locally qualified men to refresh and increase their professional knowledge in later years are very limited. ..."

Dr K Black, FRCS, Medical Officer, Straits Settlements, was appointed the first Professor of Surgery in March 1922. He also taught ophthalmology:

"During the year, an ophthalmic department was opened in the General Hospital under Mr K Black, Professor of Surgery. The attendances at his clinic are steadily increasing. ..."

On 24 September 1923, Dr A Dickson Wright was appointed a medical officer, and served under C J Smith, the senior surgeon, gaining considerable experience. When there was a proposal that he be transferred to the Federated Malay States, the governor intervened and said that Dickson Wright would have to act for Professor Black whenever he went on leave.

Department of Medicine  
New Changi Hospital  
2 Simei Street 3  
Singapore 529889

Y K Lee, MD, FRCP, LLB  
Visiting Consultant

In June 1926, the governor wrote to the Secretary of State asking for approval for the creation of a new appointment of Professor of Clinical Surgery in the College of Medicine. He stated that if approved, he recommended:

"A Dickson Wright who possesses the highest surgical qualifications and has acquired a reputation as a brilliant and up-to-date surgeon."

(In 1924, when Dickson Wright, MS, FRCS, sat for the DTM & H examination prior to his appointment as a medical officer, he passed with distinction, obtained the first place and the Duncan medal.)

The creation of the new post of Professor of Clinical Surgery, and the appointment of Dickson Wright to it, were approved. (At the same time, two other specialist posts were also approved - radiologist, General Hospital, and anaesthetist, General Hospital.)

By this time, there were three surgical specialists in Singapore: Senior Surgeon, Singapore; Professor of Surgery and Professor of Clinical Surgery, who was responsible for the teaching of surgery at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. The surgical duties of the hospital were also performed by him. The post of surgeon, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, had been abolished.

When Dickson Wright resigned to accept a post on the staff of St Mary's Hospital, London, Dr B M Johns, Medical Officer, was promoted to be Professor of Clinical Surgery in August 1928. He also taught otology, rhinology and laryngology (ENT surgery) and ran the ENT Department at the General Hospital.

In March 1930, Dr J A P Cameron, MBChB, was appointed medical officer. He became the first Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery in the University of Malaya (in Singapore) in 1952.

The work of the surgical side of the General Hospital showed an increase over that done in 1929, the increase being proportionate to the number of patients in hospital. Two thousand two hundred and thirty-eight operations were done, with 34 deaths.

Professor K Black was on leave for 8 months during 1930. During that time, his work was carried on by Prof B M Johns (for general surgery) and by Dr R Walkingshaw (for ophthalmic work).

In 1930, clinical teaching at the King Edward VII College of Medicine was thus:

"Every senior student must spend at least one year carrying out resident intern duties in hospital. These students have definite cases allotted to them, and are responsible for carrying out the investigations, both clinical and laboratory, keeping case records, methods of examination and treatment, assisting at operations, and after-treatment, and giving anaesthetics under supervision."

In 1931, the total number of operations performed in all the hospitals of Singapore numbered 5,417 with 108 deaths (including one from extraction of teeth, one from bronchoscopy and five from appendicectomy).

In 1931, Mr C J Smith, Senior Surgeon, was on leave for 8 months and his place was taken by Prof K Black.

The few surgical specialists acted for each other when one of them was on leave or sick. Sometimes staff was "loaned" from the Federated Malay States, but in 1932, the staff of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Medical Services were amalgamated to form the Malayan Medical Service. Officers of the Malayan Medical Service were liable to serve either in the Straits Settlements or in the Federated Malay States. All higher and superscale appointments in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States were then open on equal terms to officers of the Malayan Medical Service wherever serving.

In 1932 and 1933, Prof B M Johns, Professor of Clinical Surgery, was on leave from April 1932 to February 1933, and Prof K Black was on leave from February 1933 to September 1933. During these periods, Mr E C Chitty, FRCSE, (from the Federated Malay States) acted as Professor of Clinical Surgery and Surgeon for the Ear, Nose and Throat Department, General Hospital, and Prof B M Johns acted as Professor of Surgery.

When Prof K Black, Professor of Surgery, was due to retire in August 1934, Professor B M Johns, Professor of Clinical Surgery, applied for the post. The governor, however, wrote to the Secretary of State, stating that as the post was a very important one, the vacancy should be thrown open to attract the widest range of suitable candidates and that this be done by advertising in the *Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*.

In the meantime, Dr J A P Cameron was given study leave in August 1934 to prepare and sit for the FRCSE examination in March 1935, and if successful, to take a three-month course for the London Diploma in Diseases of the Ear, Nose and Throat in June. If unsuccessful in the FRCSE examination, he was to prepare for the July examination. (Cameron was appointed the first Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery in 1952.)

And in October 1934, the governor asked for permission to create a number of new appointments, one of which was that of Ophthalmic Surgeon and Physician, Singapore, and Lecturer in Ophthalmology, College of Medicine. (Professor Black had special qualifications in Eye Diseases, taught ophthalmology and ran the Eye Clinic at the General Hospital, Singapore.):

#### **"Ophthalmology**

The Professor of Surgery at the King Edward VII College of Medicine, who devoted part of his time to the Eye Department of the General Hospital, Singapore, retired in August 1934 (he deferred his departure until Mr C J Smith, Senior Surgeon, returned from leave in October), and the opportunity was taken to convert the post of Ophthalmologist into a whole-time appointment. Provision has been made in the 1935, estimates for the appointment of an Ophthalmic Physician

and Surgeon and Lecturer in Ophthalmology to the College of Medicine. It is the intention to extend the services rendered by the Eye Department to embrace the examination and treatment of school children, whose eye defects present a wide field for service."

(Dr A D Williamson arrived in November 1935 and took over the Eye Department.)

By 1934, road traffic accidents were giving the surgeons a lot of extra work :

"It is a matter of current interest to place on record that of 3,296 admissions for affections produced by external causes, 683 were for injuries caused by motor vehicles, and of these, 64 were fatal. ..."

It was also reported that the number of operations done in the large hospitals was as follows:

	operations	deaths
General Hospital	3,758	80
Tan Tock Seng Hospital	2,106	45

In the special departments at the General Hospital for the treatment of diseases of the eye and for diseases of the ear, nose and throat, the number of operations performed were:

Eye Department	344 operations
Ear, Nose and Throat Department	641 operations

Three hundred gynaecological operations were performed at the General Hospital with three deaths. (Many operations were also done at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital).

It was also recorded that spinal anaesthesia had displaced general anaesthesia to an increasing extent during the year and that a large number of patients were operated under spinal anaesthesia.

Forty-eight surgical patients were treated with X-rays and radium. The malignant conditions treated were all in an advanced state and were unsuitable for surgical intervention.

The reply from the Secretary of State regarding the appointment of the new Professor of Surgery was sent to the governor on 14 November 1934. The post had been advertised and the deans of the UK Medical Schools had been informed. There were eleven applicants, and the most suitable, in order of merit, were Messers J K Munro, D E C Mekie and Stanford Howard.

The governor sent a telegram on 21 December

1934 stating that the Council of the College of Medicine had agreed that the offer of appointment should be made to Munro.

D E C Mekie was promoted to Professor of Clinical Surgery in 1937. He had been acting in that post since 1935.

In 1937, a new outpatient Eye Department was opened at Kandang Kerbau Hospital. This clinic at first functioned on a three-day week. Later the clinic was made a daily one. The number of new patients treated was 827 with a total attendance of 3,000.

By 1938, the number of operations performed in the large hospitals had increased considerably:

	operations	deaths
General Hospital	6,589	65
Tan Tock Seng Hospital	2,912	84
General Hospital		
Ophthalmic Department	979	nil
Ear, Nose and Throat	732	6
Gynaecological	661	4

The Ophthalmic Surgeon visited Tan Tock Seng Hospital three afternoons a week. One hundred and sixty-six eye operations were performed there in 1938.

Regarding the College of Medicine, the teaching of surgery had been modified by Professor Mekie:

"The outstanding feature of the year had been the introduction of a new arrangement for the posting of students to the surgical clinics. This arrangement and division of clinical teaching into stages has proved distinctly advantageous to the students and facilitates the work of the teachers."

No mention will be made of the considerable amount of surgery done during the war with Japan and during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1941-1945) under very trying conditions.

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