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Cover Picture:
Paracelsus (1493-1541):
The Man Who Dared
(Refer to page 005-007)

Approaching 100 Years of Medical and University Education in Singapore

J S Cheah

*"Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past."
(T.S. Eliot)*

The Medical School in Singapore was founded on 3 July 1905 with an enrolment of 23 students; the Medical School was founded as "The Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School". In 1913 its name was changed to "King Edward VII Medical School, Singapore"⁽¹⁾. Its direct descendant is The Faculty of Medicine, National University of Singapore (NUS).

In just over two years on 3 July 2005, the Faculty of Medicine, NUS and NUS would be celebrating their centenaries. It is the purpose of this editorial to highlight this fast approaching important centennial event. As Singapore is relatively young (having been founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819), it is a rare event to celebrate 100 years of existence. Many events are being planned to commemorate the centenary of the Faculty of Medicine, NUS and NUS.

When Singapore celebrated its centenary, among the many publications were two great books published to document its history during its first 100 years of existence: "One Hundred Years of Singapore"⁽¹⁾, edited by Makepeace, Brooke and Braddel in two volumes (Volume 1, 592 pages; Volume 2, 668 pages; published in 1921) and "One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore" by Song Ong Siang (602 pages) published in 1923⁽²⁾. These two books have numerous photographs. "Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya", edited by Wright and Cartwright, and published in 1908⁽³⁾ is arguably the most illustrious book on the early history of Singapore; it is a monumental book, with 959 pages, leatherbound and weighs 4 kg⁽³⁾! Hopefully publications to commemorate the centenary of our Medical School and NUS can compare favourably to the above three books⁽¹⁻³⁾ on the history of Singapore.

Prior to the establishment of the Medical School in 1905, attempts were made to train "locals" for the medical service in The Straits Settlements (of which Singapore was part of) as "Assistant Apothecary", "Hospital Dresser" and "Sub-Assistant Surgeon". In those days only Britons could be Medical Officers, whereas the ranks of Medical Subordinate were open to both Britons and Indo-Britons. The early history of medical education in Singapore and the Straits Settlements from 1786 to 1871 has been described in great detail by Lee Yong Kiat (1978)⁽⁴⁾. He has also summarised the history of medical education in Singapore from 1819-1990⁽⁵⁾.

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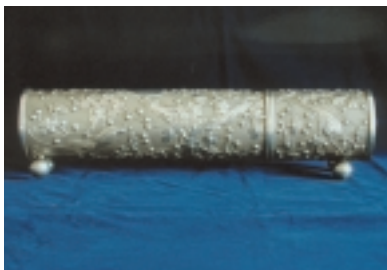


Fig. 1 The Silver scroll holder presented to Dr G.D. Freer (in 1909) by the students, Medical School, Singapore. It is made in Canton, China; 13½ inches in length; diameter 3¾ inches.

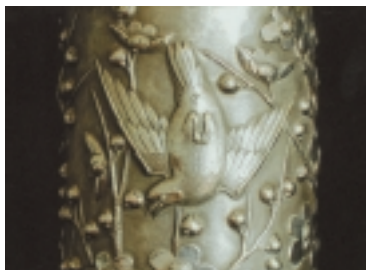


Fig. 2 A close up of the beautiful details of the silver scroll holder shown in Fig. 1.

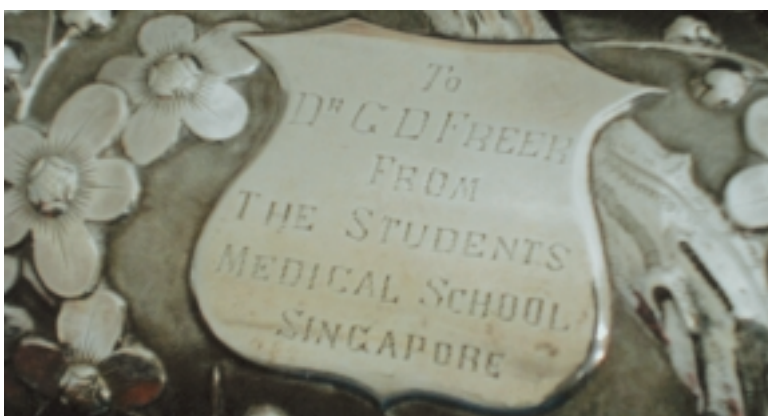


Fig. 3 The inscription on the silver scroll holder.

Commemorative publications were made to mark the 50th, 60th, 75th and 90th anniversaries of the Medical School⁽⁶⁻⁹⁾; these publications contain useful information, interesting reminiscences, list of graduates etc. A historical account of the Medical School from 1905 to 1949 was given by Faris (1949)⁽¹⁰⁾. It is hoped that publications marking the Centenary of the Medical School and NUS in 2005 would contain readable and accurate historical information illustrated with profuse, pleasing and high-quality illustrations.

The Medical School began on 3 July 1905. The first Principal of the school was Dr Gerald Dudley Freer, ex-colonial Surgeon Resident of Penang. Dr Freer reported on the beginning of the Medical School: "The new Medical School began on 3 July..., The buildings in the whole Female Lunatic Asylum were altered and equipped for the purpose of a Medical School.... The situation is excellent, as it is quite close to the General Hospital, where the students will later carry on some of their hospital work. ...All the classes were held there with the exception of those in Chemistry which were held by the Government Analyst, in the temporary laboratories in Coleman Street.... Twenty three students were enrolled, of whom nine were Chinese and the remainder Eurasians 6, Tamils 5, Ceylonese 1, Malay 1 and European 1.... On September 28th, the School was formally opened by His Excellency the Governor, Sir John Anderson.... His Excellency made a very encouraging speech, which was listened to with interest by a large gathering, including students and their friends, those interested in founding the School, the school staff, and most of the leading medical practitioners of Singapore..."⁽¹¹⁾.

Dr Freer was Principal of the Medical School from 3 July 1905 to February 3 1909 (when he was appointed Senior Medical Officer, Selangor). The medical students presented Dr Freer a farewell scroll

When the Medical School started in 1905 it was called "The Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School"; its name was changed in 1913 to "King Edward VII Medical School, Singapore" and then to "King Edward VII College of Medicine" in 1921.

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contained in a beautiful silver scroll holder (Figure 1). The whereabouts of the scroll is unknown. The silver scroll holder is cylindrical, 13½ inches long with a diameter of 3¾ inches. It is made in Canton, China and is beautifully chased with magpies among prunus blossoms and branches (Fig. 1). The close up of a magpie is shown in Fig. 2.


The inscription on the silver scroll holder reads: "To/Dr G.D. Freer/From/The Students/Medical School/Singapore": (Fig. 3) There is no date on the inscription but it must be 1909 as Dr Freer left his post on 3 February 1909.

The silver scroll holder is close to a 100 years old and it is likely to be the oldest surviving artefact of the Medical School.

When the Medical School started in 1905 it was called "The Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School"; its name was changed in 1913 to "King Edward VII Medical School, Singapore" and then to "King Edward VII College of Medicine" in 1921. In 1949 the College of Medicine amalgamated with Raffles College to become the University of Malaya and became its Faculty of Medicine. In 1962, it became the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Singapore which in 1982 became the National University of Singapore (NUS)⁽⁵⁾.

The Medical School has functioned continuously since 1905 except during the Japanese Occupation (1942 - 1945). During the Japanese Occupation, the Japanese Military Administration reopened the Medical College on 27 April 1943 (1943) and it was known as The Marei Ika Daigaku (or Syonan Medical College). It was sited at the Tan Tock Seng Hospital (Hakua Byoin). The Ika Daigaku relocated to the General Hospital, Malacca in February 1944 (1944) when it functioned till the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945⁽¹²⁾. After the British reoccupation of Singapore, the College of Medicine resumed classes in June 1946⁽⁵⁾.

Come 3 July 2005, the Faculty of Medicine, NUS and NUS would be celebrating their centenaries. A 100 years is a long time in the short history of Singapore. Hopefully this editorial will drum up interest among undergraduates, graduates, educationists etc to join in the celebrations in 2005 to make the centenaries of the Medical School and NUS truly momentous occasions.

"The farther you look, the farther forward you are likely to see".
 (Sir Winston Churchill). 

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