

DR TAN CHENG IM (1926–2010)

On May 5, 2010, through the demise of Dr Tan Cheng Im, we lost a Singapore pioneer of Mass Cancer Screening. Cheng Im was the wife of Tow Siang Hwa, a former Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the University of Singapore. She was born in Penang and attended the King Edward VII College of Medicine, where she met her future husband. They were married in 1954 and had four children. Most people are familiar with their generous contributions to the Christian church, but perhaps not many are aware of Cheng Im's involvement with women's health.

In the mid-1960s, Kandang Kerbau Hospital was a 'birthquake hospital'. A large percentage of its 40,000 annual deliveries were unbooked and complicated. On the gynaecological side, late cancers were commonplace during that period.

Dr Tan Cheng Im's attention was drawn to cervical cancer, which was the commonest cancer affecting women in Singapore at that time. In collaboration with Dr RA Barter, Professor of Gynaecological Pathology at the University of Western Australia, Perth, Dr Tan set up the first Cytology Laboratory in Singapore in 1965 to offer routine cervical cancer screening by Papanicolou smears for women at risk. She went to Perth with a team of three cytotechnicians for training, and on their return, the women first worked with the University Department at Kandang Kerbau Hospital. Subsequently, Dr Tan started a private laboratory that provided a cytology service to private medical practitioners in Singapore, Malaysia, Borneo and Indonesia.

The Cervical Cancer Screening Programme is possibly the first screening programme that has the unique ability to detect precancerous lesions and thus, nip cancer in the bud. Dr Tan Cheng Im's contribution to Singapore is that she highlighted an important axiom of good clinical practice that detecting illness at its inception prevents late complications, and mass screening is the way to go about it.

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