

THE SINGAPORE MEDICAL JOURNAL - THE EARLY YEARS

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Medical journalism almost invariably comes some time after the establishment of a medical organisation or institution. This is to be expected as journalism is to satisfy the need for records of data, information and activities, and it takes time to accumulate adequate material to warrant publication. Also, for journalism to flourish, there must be sufficient readership to make communication worthwhile. However, in Singapore, medical journalism came early, and literally preceded the setting up of medical institutions. It was imported with western medicine which was foreign to the then existing local population. The colonial administration brought along western-trained doctors to look after its own people - administrators, soldiers and some of its local employees. The doctors in turn began medical journalism more as the customary practice at "home", than a genuine response to local needs.

The beginning took the form of the Straits Medical Society and the Straits Medical Journal. These became affiliated organs of the British Medical Association by the following year, and the journal appeared formally though irregularly as the Straits Medical Journal (Malayan Branch).

Reference to that journal showed that the disease pattern at that time in Singapore was chiefly one of infectious fevers and addiction, particularly opium addiction, and even at that time, the records showed that there was a distinct pattern of disorder peculiar to different races which consisted principally of Malays, Chinese and Indians. Within a few years of the formation of the Straits Medical Association, an affiliation with the British Medical Journal altered its name and it became the British-Medical Journal (Malayan Branch); subsequently it became known as The Malayan Medical Journal. This continued to be the only journal for Malaya, which at that time included the territories of Singapore and the Federation of Malaya, until 1948, when a new journal was published in Singapore.

This new journal was known as the Proceedings of the Alumni Association. It is necessary to trace the history of the development of local medicine to appreciate the coming of this new journal, because it marked the activity of local graduates in medicine. A local medical school was formed 66 years ago, and in 1948, after two previous abortive attempts, the local graduates, then constituting a body known as the Alumni Association, felt that they should get together to discuss various aspects of medicine so as to improve medical standards, and that these discussions should go on record for the benefit of the other doctors in the country and for record purposes. Accordingly, the first publication appeared in 1948, and this publication continued until 1960. Scanning through this jour-

nal, one could see that the journal began with reports of interesting cases seen by various doctors, most of them working in local hospitals. In addition, from the editorial policy of that time it could be observed that the local graduates were also very active in the field of medical politics, in the sense that they were actively campaigning for two things - firstly, an improvement of medical education, and secondly, equal treatment for all doctors, whether they came from overseas or were trained locally.

At that time, local medical education was carried out by a College of Medicine which conferred a licentiate of medicine and surgery, and although the diploma was accepted for registration by the General Medical Council from 1916, it was felt that the time had come to further extend the standard of medical education. A University Commission, headed by Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, advocated the formation of a university. In 1949 the University of Malaya came into existence, incorporating Raffles College and the Medical College, and from then onwards, local doctors graduated with a university degree - MBBS. This university was a logical continuation of the Medical College. This was shown by the recognition of all licentiate holders as members of the Guild of Graduates of the University of Malaya, and also, for practical purposes, the licentiate diploma was accepted as equivalent to the bachelor's degree of medicine and surgery, both academically and professionally.

The second activity was directed to the fact that for many years the local graduates were accepted by the Government on a different and inferior salary scale, compared with that of doctors recruited from overseas. The Japanese occupation period showed that the local doctors were able to run the medical services satisfactorily on their own. After the occupation period was over, a number of local doctors went overseas to the United Kingdom and successfully obtained higher degrees, such as the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians of England. Hence, it was felt that the time had come to urge that the local medical degree should be accepted at par with foreign degrees, and the editorial policy at that time reflected those two activities very vividly. The principle of unification was accepted by 1950, and from then on, the entire medical profession in Malaya worked as one, as they were now treated equally, with no reservations or special privileges for any particular group. It is important to note that although there was controversy and dispute during that time, there was no recrimination or acrimony between doctors of different groups, and that the harmony achieved after the reunification was remarkable, all doctors working side by side very successfully. This harmony is also reflected in the fact that the Alumni Association had a category known as Associate Members, comprising doctors who had graduated from other schools, and it was important to note that the associate membership roll included practically all the foreign doctors practising in Singapore, suggesting that the Alumni Association was in fact a sort of a national association as far as doctors were concerned.

With the coming of this new journal, the trend of the edit-

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ing policy of The Malayan Medical Journal and the Alumni Proceedings diverged. The Malayan Medical Journal usually published studies and reports in the field of public health mostly conducted by the Institute of Medical Research in Kuala Lumpur, whereas the Alumni Proceedings were confined to clinical medicine, case reports and occasionally discussions on education. This tendency was to persist until 1960, when, because of the changing political situation, Singapore and the Federation were separated, and in pursuance of the changing politics, the doctors in the Federation of Malaya and the doctors of Singapore, much against their wishes, had to form two separate associations - namely, the Malayan Medical Association for the Federation of Malaya and the Singapore Medical Association for the doctors in Singapore. However, at heart, the doctors of both territories remained one, they still maintained a great deal of contact and their constitutions were, in fact, counterpart of one another, and they enjoyed reciprocal privileges, including the receipt of the journals of both associations. The Alumni Proceedings were then replaced by the Singapore Medical Journal, the first volume of which appeared in 1960. This change in name was a welcome step, as it now conferred upon the journal a truly national bias, for although the Alumni Proceedings were in fact already a national medical journal, their very name suggested that they were only the proceedings of a select society.

The British Medical Association magnanimously assisted the birth of the Singapore Medical Association by transferring funds locally and winding up its Malayan Branch. The Singapore Medical Association was then affiliated with the British Medical Association, and by the end of 1961, the great majority of doctors in Singapore were members of the Singapore Medical Association. At the same time, the Singapore Medical Journal has undergone a steady change. Its contents began to show that local doctors were now engaged in more systematized studies, rather than just reporting odd cases of clinical or pathological interest. Over the years when the Alumni Proceedings were in existence, contacts were made with associations overseas and exchanges with foreign journals took place. This process has continued with the Singapore Medical Journal, and at present we are on the exchange list with about 200 units overseas, including many well-known universities and medical associations in England, on the Continent, in America, in South-East Asia, and from the Australian continent and with the New Zealand Medical Association.

Having a medical journal was only the beginning of a long journey. The objectives had to be set, and the infrastructure of staff and finance had to be established. With Singapore being a young republic, its national medical journal likewise had its birth pangs. The first few years were given over to build the framework of administration, and to seek a set of objectives that would be functional and generally acceptable. It had seemed logical to expect that a national journal of a profession must

proclaim and reflect the prevailing medical philosophy and local professional attitude and aspirations. It also should mirror the local development of medicine in the way of learning and practical application. In other words, it should be an important resource material of the growth of local medicine in all facets.

Thus the activity of an editor of a journal at its infancy has been the highlighting of professional issues so that out of the arguments and controversies, a common trend might become discernable as the local viewpoint, credo or aspiration. A careful evaluation of the Singapore Medical Journal over the years would show that the arduous journey has begun, but the journey's end is nowhere in view as yet.

A professional journal cannot ignore academic standards, and to maintain standards, authors had to be persuaded to have their most important findings published locally. Surprisingly, this proved to be a very difficult task, because firstly, the Singapore Medical Journal was then a new journal with limited circulation and readership, and authors, especially local ones, quite naturally preferred to publish in media of longer standing, with a wider circulation, or more critical readership. Further, academic assessors up till today could still be biased in favour of "publication in reputable journals internationally" which generally do not include the local ones (a prophet is without honour in his own country). This view must be at least partially fallacious, as all "reputable" journals must begin sometime with the humble origin of local ones, and the reputation that came later has been the result of authors, especially local ones, publishing their most important findings there. In other words, it is the case of a journal being built up by the work of the authors, rather than the vindication of the ability of the authors by the authority of the journal.

After 12 years, I was more than glad to hand over to my successor - Dr Tan Kheng Khoo. Some of the reasons for that decision have been firstly, my retirement from the institutional job in 1972, thereby losing most of the infrastructural support and the intimate contact with academic activities; and secondly my successor was enthusiastic and full of new ideas. Since then, the journal has seen more changes, but it is still my hope that some of the original aspirations will remain clear and vibrant.

Unlike specialised journals such as in Neurology, where the primary function is to communicate on a special topic, a national journal has functions of educational, and of intersocial grouping communications purposes. It is also a forum for health controversies and policy declaration. At the very least, it should be a mouth piece of professional intentions. It can only fulfill this with contributors coming from thinkers and administrators of the profession. It is a difficult task to harmonise these varied functions without compromising its academic content, and that shall be the perplexing problem of all its editors.