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How the first medical school came about

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UNIVERSITY of Malaya is making preparations to celebrate its centenary in 2005. But celebrations will probably begin one year earlier. The older generation of the university's graduates has a fairly good idea of its history. But the undergraduates today very likely have no inkling how it all began.

Modern education in Malaysia has a long history. The London Missionary Society introduced modern education in Malacca, slightly earlier than R.S. Hutchings, Colonial Chaplain in Penang and the founder of the Penang Free School (1816). Thereafter, educational development proceeded, interrupted briefly by the Japanese Occupation, at an increasingly faster pace. It has not stopped.

The first major step taken towards promoting tertiary education was the introduction of the Queens Scholarships by the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Cecil Clementi Smith, in 1885, in honour of Queen Victoria, then still reigning.

The immediate objects were:

(1) to allow promising boys an opportunity of completing their studies in England; and (2) to encourage a number of boys to remain in school and acquire a really useful education.

The first scholars in 1886 were C.S. Angus and James Aitken, both of Raffles Institution, Singapore, who studied engineering and law respectively. A year later, the Singapore Free Press commented that one medical person would be of greater service to the country than a dozen lawyers or engineers. The third scholar was Lim Boon Keng, also of Raffles Singapore, who went on to study medicine at the Edinburgh University. He was later to become the first Vice-Chancellor of the Amoy (Xiamen) University founded by Tan Kah Kee of Singapore.

The great emphasis placed on the study of medicine was unavoidable as the rapid economic development of the country was plagued by the large number of fatalities among the labourers as a result of malaria and beri-beri. In 1900, a Pathological Institute was established in Kuala Lumpur through the efforts of Sir Frank Swettenham, the Resident-General of the Federated Malay States, to undertake research in tropical diseases. It became known as the Institute of Medical Research, which still exists.

But the idea of sending local students to study medicine overseas (primarily at Calcutta or Melbourne) was first mooted by the Singapore Free Press (1887). There would then be no necessity, said the paper, for their becoming full-blown MDs or LRCSs at once. However, those who aspired and could afford to obtain the same qualifications as European practitioners could proceed to Europe.

Eventually, it was only in September 1904 that a concerted move was made to appeal to the British administration for the establishment and maintenance of a medical school in Singapore to enable residents of the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States to be trained so that they could enter Government service as assistant surgeons or practise their profession as general practitioners.

The petition was inspired by developments initiated by the Principal Colonial Medical Officer, Dr Simon, who had, in 1889, recommended that a medical school should be established to help meet the needs of Government service. As a result, the commission appointed to inquire into the system of education in the Straits Settlements specifically mentioned, in its

report of 1902, that great advantage would accrue to the colony and the native states by the introduction of a system of training which would produce, out of local material, men better qualified to supply the demand for assistant surgeons and general practitioners among the native population and the poorer inhabitants.

Sir John Anderson, who had arrived a year earlier as the Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Malay States, welcomed progressive ideas.

He challenged the local community to raise funds for the project and the government, he promised, would match the collection dollar for dollar. The public subscribed over \$80,000. The government provided the building and site of the Female Lunatic Asylum which had been moved to Pasir Panjang.

The first session of the medical school began on July 3, 1905, with 23 students. The formal opening, however, took place on Sept 28, 1905. Within the next few years, the school made considerable progress. The generosity of Tan Teck Guan (the father of Tan Chay Yan who was the first Chinese to plant rubber) enabled the school to have a new building in 1911.

In 1912, the standard of the Preliminary Examination became that of the Senior Cambridge Certificate. In the same year, the committee of the King Edward VII Memorial Fund handed over to the council of the school the sum of \$124,855 to found a King Edward professorship. The fund was allocated to a Chair of Physiology.

Until then, the school had been called The Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School. In 1913, by ordinance, it was changed to King Edward VII Medical School, Singapore. Since 1905, the school/college produced numerous doctors of various ethnic groups, many of whom contributed to society way beyond the call of duty. Many of them were outstanding sportsmen. One of those admitted to the college before the establishment of the University of Malaya was Mahathir Mohamad. He graduated from the university with an MBBS.