

Citation for  
College of Public Health and Occupational Physicians'  
2019 Lifetime Achievement Award Winner  
Associate Professor Dr Wong Mee Lian

By Adj Asst Prof Clive Tan

Good morning to our Guest of Honour, Mr Chan Heng Kee, Permanent Secretary of Health

Dr SRE Sayampanathan, Master, Academy of Medicine

Associate Professor Dr Vernon Lee, President of the College of Public Health and Occupational Physicians

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am deeply honoured to be the citation reader for this year's Lifetime Achievement Award winner, Associate Professor Dr Wong Mee Lian.

Those who know Prof Wong would know of her life work in prevention of sexually transmitted infections in sex workers — an area where she dedicated more than 20 years of her life — to improve the safety of the working conditions of “sex workers” in Singapore.

If the term “sex worker” makes you uncomfortable, you are not alone. Most people would cringe at the term, not knowing whether it is legal or not; most people would shun them, avoid them, perhaps even condemn them — but Prof Wong, she is made from a different material driven by a strong sense of justice, a passion to help the marginalised, and a drive to give a voice to the voiceless — she had spent countless weeks, months, years in the red light districts of Singapore, making a difference to this invisible population.

Today, in year 2019, I would say we can speak of sex work with more openness and perhaps even accept the truth that it is the “oldest profession in the world”. But in the 1990s when Prof Wong started work in this area, it was a very different time – much more conservative. In that era, sexually transmitted disease was a big problem. It was estimated that at that time in Singapore, one in two brothel-based sex workers had been infected annually with a STI. If you can recall, this was also the time where HIV was a growing concern globally — Freddie Mercury, lead singer of Queen, died in 1991 from AIDS. STI was a huge problem and there was a social stigma surrounding people who contracted STIs, and not surprisingly an even bigger stigma on sex workers. Then came along Prof Wong, who wanted to tackle this public health issue in her own unique ground-up way — but there were no funds! Then, nobody would fund this kind of research — but Prof Wong, she never gave up.

She was passionate about this public health problem, and wanted to help the sex workers be able to protect themselves and reduce the spread of STIs in the community. She is able to see past the social stigma of the occupation, and break it down into its essentials: these sex workers — if they had a choice, they would earn their money in other ways. But they had tough life situations; they had to make difficult choices and personal sacrifices to earn money to raise their families. Prof Wong went in to help, with the purest of intentions — there was no fame and glory in this. It was difficult then for Prof Wong to get funds for research in this area. Eventually Prof Wong found a grant call from the NGO, “Action for AIDS”, and this kick-started her research in STI prevention. The success and health impact of that research paved the way for subsequent NMRC funds for her research.

One of the very first projects she did, involved a survey of 800+ brothel-based sex workers, where she learnt that many of them did not use condoms regularly. It was a very big problem — these sex workers didn’t know how and were afraid to say no to their customers. These were very vulnerable populations, with no voice at the society level. However, through the survey, Prof Wong found that there were about 20 plus sex workers who could consistently get their clients to use condoms. So she was able to get these “experts” to share their practical tips and best practices with the others, to help one another work more safely. To Prof Wong, she said she learnt a lot from these sex workers, humbly stating that

they were the experts and that she was merely “facilitating”. But to the sex workers, what they saw was this academic professor seated high up, from the University, who came down to their level — the brothels — to sit with them, understand their problems, improve their work conditions, and gave the community, this marginalised population, a voice. Prof Wong spoke up for the voiceless, and stood up for the marginalised.

Fortunately, this good work with the team at DSC Clinic didn’t go unnoticed. At that time in the late 1990s, STI prevention was a huge regional public health issue, given the HIV epidemic and the huge social stigma. Prof Wong’s excellent research and impactful work on promoting the use of condoms and prevention of STIs amongst sex workers in Singapore, was internationally recognised — Prof Wong and her team of researchers were awarded the prestigious Wilf Howe Memorial Prize by the Faculty of Occupational Medicine, Royal College of Physicians, London in 2008. Her work on STI prevention had been widely cited and used in STI prevention programme development in countries like India, China, United Kingdom, Cambodia, and Canada.

Later on in her career, Prof Wong again found herself working on another public health issue that was “under the radar” — Breast cancer screening in minority ethnic groups. In the past two decades, breast screening rates for Malay women remained low. A few years ago, Associate Professor Mikael Hartman, leader of the Breast Cancer programme at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, discussed with Prof Wong about the problem of low rates of breast cancer screening among Malay women in Singapore. Again, she found it difficult to get research funds to do this somewhat “less impactful” type of research. “Well, why it was ‘less impactful?’”, one might ask. Because when you do research and intervention programmes on minority populations, even when you have a 50% improvement, the absolute number of people benefitting from it is still small, by comparison. The lack of ring-fenced research funds for these minority groups is a challenge for researchers. But even with the difficulty in securing funding, Prof Wong didn’t give up trying. In the end, it was two surgeons from NUH, Prof CN Lee and Prof Mikael Hartman, who helped raised \$100,000 to help Prof Wong kick-off her research in this area. Her mixed methods research helped uncover reasons why Malay women did not want to go for breast cancer screening; it

revealed that there was a strong cultural element to this behaviour. She then spoke to religious leaders and teachers at MUIS about her findings, and they were very keen to collaborate with her and her research team to help improve the breast cancer screening rates for the local Malay women population.

MUIS said, “Thank you, this is the first time someone has approached us to work with us on this screening problem on this scale”. And again, Prof Wong humbly said, “I learnt so much from them; they have taught me so much. These religious authorities and teachers from MUIS and the Malay women – they are the experts; I’m just facilitating...”

I could stop here, but it would be incomplete if I do not briefly cover two other important aspects — Prof Wong as a teacher and mentor, and Prof Wong as a person — what shaped her to become the person she is now.

For close to 30 years in NUS, she has taught numerous students — from medical school, MPH candidates, preventive medicine residents, mentored Masters and PhD candidates. Her students have only good things to say about her — if I were to summarise it, “always patient, nurturing and motherly, and full of love”.

She shared with me: “Whenever you become a teacher, you must teach your students so well, that they become better than you” — this was not said by Prof Wong — she shared that this was said by her late father, who was a school teacher. I believe Prof Wong had memorised this saying, and it allows us to have a brief glimpse of how she came to become such an inspirational teacher and mentor.

Why is she so good at what she does, how did she grow up, how was it like for her in her formative years?

If you think that life had been easy for her — it has not. She came from a humble family background; her father was a teacher, and her mother was a very gentle woman who took care of her and her 5 siblings at home. She was schooled in Malaysia, studied Medicine on a Malaysian Federal Government scholarship, worked at the Ministry of Health and then at the University of Malaya. Her first projects in Public Health were highly ethnographical in nature — working on improving Maternal and Child Health for village women in the Longhouse

community in Sarawak. She lived amongst these women for weeks (this was in the 1980s) — followed them to the padi fields, travelled to these areas by boat, lived amongst them to observe their culture — to firstly “seek to understand”, and then develop “culturally sensitive” intervention programmes. She also followed the “barefoot doctors” in Sabah, to understand how health services could be delivered through them to remote populations in the rural areas.

She then applied for a teaching position in Singapore and was recruited by Prof Lee to work in NUS in the early 1990s.

At the peak of her career in the earlier part of this decade, she was diagnosed with late stage colon cancer, but she fought hard against the disease, and with the support of her family, her colleagues, church community, and excellent medical care from Professor John Wong and his team — she is now in remission and has since continued her teaching and research back at NUS. As a cancer survivor, she now shares her experience with people diagnosed with cancer, through her informal cancer support groups — encouraging people to fight on, and not give up.

This would not be the first Award that Prof Wong had won. In 2017, she had already been given a Lifetime Achievement Award in Health and Medical Sciences, by the Venus International Foundation in India. But the College of Public Health and Occupational Physicians hopes that this award will be the one that she treasures the most. After all, the impact of her work is most felt by the people in Singapore — especially the underserved and the marginalised groups.

Prof Wong — thank you for always doing your best for others, and for being such an inspiration to the public health and occupational medicine community. Ladies and Gentlemen — the 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award Winner — Associate Professor Dr Wong Mee Lian.