

IN MEMORIAM

Woon Chee Yee 1946-2011



Dr. Woon Chee Yee was born in 1946 in Ipoh, Malaysia. His father had a furniture shop in Ipoh, and passed away when Dr Yee was 4 years old. He was thus brought up by the mother with his younger brother. He studied in the Anglo-Chinese School in Ipoh before admission to the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur where he graduated in 1971. After a year as a houseman in the Johore Bahru General Hospital, Malaysia and a further two years as a medical officer in the University Hospital Kuala Lumpur, he moved to United Kingdom through the WHO Academic Staff Training Scholarship, where he spent one year as an Honorary Registrar in the Department of Neurology at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle upon Tyne. Subsequently, he returned to the University of Malaya as a Lecturer in the Department of Medicine for three years. In 1979, he left for Canada to undertake a Neurology residency at the University of Toronto, and worked at Sunnybrook, Mt Sinai, Toronto General and St Michael's Hospitals. In the early 1980's, Dr. Yee accepted a fellowship in neuromuscular

diseases at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Baltimore, USA. Professor Alan Pestronk whom he worked with at the time commended that Dr. Yee was a first-rate clinician who had also done several research projects on plasticity at the neuromuscular junction. There he developed an interest in antibody-associated neuromuscular disorders. At the end of his fellowship at the John Hopkins, he went back to Canada to be a research fellow in the Department of Clinical Neurological Sciences, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario. As a neurologist specialized in neuromuscular disorders, he was appointed a Lecturer followed by an Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada.

In 1989, Dr. Yee joined Professor Pestronk to start a Neuromuscular Service at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, USA, where he built up the Neuromuscular Electrodiagnostic Service into an excellent clinical and teaching unit. He was later appointed as an Assistant Professor of Neurology and the Director of EMG Laboratory. He was at the Washington University for 10 years before relocating to Singapore to fulfill his long desire to be with his family. As the Director of EMG Laboratory, he taught EMG to many residents and fellows who spoke highly of him even until now. Professor Pestronk commented that he was a wonderful and wise man whose advice was often sought by his colleagues and friends. His departure for Singapore caused great disappointment to his colleagues at the Washington University.

When he arrived in Singapore in 1998, Dr. Yee was appointed the Deputy Director for Research and Senior Consultant Neurologist at the National Neuroscience Institute (NNI). He continued to see patients, mainly with neuromuscular disorders, and also did EMG studies. He was a dedicated doctor that provided such excellent services, that many patients still fondly remember him. He was instrumental in setting up and was the Director of the Neuromuscular laboratory in NNI. During that period, he was one of the very few doctors in Singapore that possessed the expertise to analyze both muscle and nerve biopsies. He also developed the capability to do ganglioside antibodies (e.g. anti-GQ1b, anti-GM1) as well as paraneoplastic antibody screening. As the Deputy Director for Research, Dr. Yee oversaw all research activities in NNI and was engaged in research administration as well as in the establishment of the Molecular Genetic research program in neuromuscular diseases. Under this program he and his team developed diagnostic tests for the many novel genes associated with neuromuscular disorders. Subsequently, the validated protocols for these genetic tests were used to establish Neurogenetics Diagnostic Laboratory at NNI.

In 2008, Dr. Yee moved to the Singapore General Hospital where he held the position of Senior Principal Research Scientist till his demise. He was fully engaged in both basic and applied research, and had formed extensive and fruitful local and international collaborations to develop RNA based molecular therapeutic strategies for the treatment of neuromuscular and other human diseases/disorders. Among the studies were the application of antisense oligonucleotides (AONs) and trans-splicing to correct mRNA reading frame shift. His research team developed novel approach to design AONs to target pre-mRNA molecule. AONs were designed and have been validated for many genes (DMD, SMN, eIF4E, SOD1, BACE1, BACE1-as, PKM and ABL).

Simultaneously, Dr. Yee actively pushed for the progress of the development of drugs for the therapy of Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD). He was in the midst of publishing a manuscript on an approach to rationally design efficient drugs for the treatment of DMD, and was preparing to start human clinical trials for drugs developed by his team.

Dr. Yee was instrumental in establishing the Muscular Dystrophy Association of Singapore (MDAS) in 2000, and has served as its past President. According to the Senior Manager of the Association Ms. Sherena Loh, Dr. Yee was very committed and would encourage the members to take part in sports as a way to empowering them. The MDAS has made good progress and now has its own center and vehicle as services for its members.

In January 2001, the Asian and Oceanian Myology Center (AOMC) was inaugurated in Tokyo, Japan. Dr. Yee was the founding member and member of the Executive Board from Singapore. He was the Secretary of the Board during 2001-2007, and was the Vice-President from 2007 till to date, the period when Dr. Ikuya Nonaka was the President. AOMC is the main body in Asia and Oceania, to promote research, education and clinical care in muscle diseases in the region. Dr. Yee was very active in the scientific and educational activities of AOMC. He hosted the 3rd annual meeting in Singapore in 2004, and helped to organize its many other activities. He is remembered in the AOMC executive board for his many ideas that were expressed clearly, and his gentle and friendly predispositions.

Dr. Yee was also a member of the Royal College of Physicians of United Kingdom, member of the American Academy of Neurology, member of the World Muscle Society, fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, and fellow of the American Association of Neuromuscular and Electrodiagnostic Medicine.

Dr. Yee was an excellent clinician and dedicated scientist. To many of his friends and colleagues, he was brilliant, cultured and knowledgeable. Dr Yee had a wide interest, including arts, poetry, literature and music. As a person, he was confident, dignified, organized, precise, responsible, meticulous, considerate, polite and caring. He was a genuine gentleman and a perfectionist.

Dr. Yee was a great teacher and was always willing to share his wealth of knowledge and expertise with the younger colleagues. Dr. Yee was kind and attentive. He spent time with them to write research grants and papers painstakingly by going through line-by-line and word-by-word. In their view, Dr. Yee was a very passionate and dedicated clinician and researcher.

Dr. Yee suffered from a leiomyosarcoma originating from his inferior vena cava and resultant multiple metastases. He passed away peacefully on 31st August 2011, six weeks upon diagnosis, at the age of 65. He is survived by his beloved mother, brother and a nephew. May his spirit rest in peace.

Acknowledgement

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