

Dr Kok-cheang Yeo (1903–2004): the first Chinese Director of Medical and Health Services in Hong Kong

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Dr Kok-cheang Yeo (楊國璋, 1903–2004) [MB, BS, MD, DPH, DTM&H, CMG] diligently served in Hong Kong's Medical Department for 30 years. He remained in Hong Kong during the Second World War, prioritising the good of the community over his personal safety. After the war, he effectively fought infectious diseases, notably tuberculosis (TB).

Born in Penang, Malaysia in 1903, Yeo received his medical education from The University of Hong Kong (HKU), graduating in 1925, before earning a diploma in public health (DPH) with distinction from University of Cambridge and a diploma in tropical medicine and hygiene (DTM&H) from Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine in the United Kingdom. In 1928, he joined the government's Medical Department.¹ Two years later, he completed his medical degree in state medicine at HKU and by 1939 was a senior Chinese Health Officer.²

At the request of the then Director of Medical Services Dr Percy Selwyn Selwyn-Clarke, Yeo stayed in Japanese-occupied Hong Kong rather than escaping to Free China. Selwyn-Clarke, with the approval of the Colonial Secretary, had chosen to work with the Japanese to maintain public health and prevent epidemics, though the director anticipated his own imprisonment at any time. Yeo was Selwyn-Clarke's most trusted Chinese Health Officer and also the most experienced and knowledgeable with regards to fighting infectious diseases.

Selwyn-Clarke's worries were proved right in 1943 when he was arrested, tortured, and imprisoned for spying. Similarly, Yeo was detained in solitary confinement and interrogated daily for 2 months. After his release, Yeo continued to maintain public health in Hong Kong, though he was paid only a small sack of rice to feed a family of five for the duration of the occupation. His family survived by growing vegetables in the backyard of their rented house.³

In the postwar era, Yeo demonstrated his remarkable skills as a leader and administrator. In early 1946, the Medical Department initiated several programmes aimed at preventing infectious diseases, including smallpox and cholera, as well as an anti-malaria programme. The following year, as the Medical Department's Deputy Director

of Health, Yeo implemented these programmes. The smallpox vaccination campaign immunised >1 million residents annually for several years; consequently, Hong Kong's last recorded cases of the disease were in 1952.⁴ Every year before the summer, the department launched a city-wide anti-cholera inoculation and education campaign and imposed strict quarantine measures to prevent a severe outbreak.^{5,6} There was no major outbreak of cholera during his time at the helm.

Yeo was promoted to Deputy Director of Medical and Health Services in 1950 and Director in 1952—the first Chinese to be appointed to this role.⁷ In addition to continuing the infectious disease prevention policies, he proposed compulsory treatment for individuals with venereal diseases to counter the high incidence after the war. The Venereal Disease Ordinance was passed in 1951, providing free consultation and treatment for affected individuals.⁸ All pregnant women were screened for syphilis, and as a result, congenital syphilis all but disappeared within a few years. Moreover, Yeo instigated the use of the combined immunisation against diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus; by the 1970s, cases of these diseases were unheard of in Hong Kong.⁹

Under Yeo's directorship, the government's Tuberculosis Service, in conjunction with the Ruttonjee Sanatorium, began administering the Bacilli Calmette–Guerin vaccination in 1952.¹⁰ Incidence of TB was high after the war; in children, tuberculous meningitis accounted for 22% of all TB deaths. However, by the late 1960s, 95% of newborns and children had received the Bacilli Calmette–Guerin vaccine, drastically reducing fatalities from tuberculous meningitis.¹¹ In fact, the TB mortality rate more than halved under Yeo's supervision, from 208 per 100 000 in 1951 to 97 per 100 000 in 1957 when he retired. During the same period, the TB notification rate declined from 689 to 499 per 100 000.¹² When effective drugs became more readily available and outpatient treatment possible, Yeo organised more TB clinics to meet the need.¹³

Prior to Yeo's leadership, leprosy had been neglected by the medical profession and the people of Hong Kong.^{14,15} However, Yeo helped the non-governmental organisation The Leprosy Mission



FIG. Dr Kok-cheang Yeo (right), then Hong Kong Governor Sir Alexander Grantham (centre), and Prof Gordon King (left) at the opening of the new Tsan Yuk Hospital in Sai Ying Pun in 1955. Photo donated by Prof Gordon King to the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences

Hong Kong Auxiliary establish a leper colony and hospital on Hay Ling Chau, a small island off Lantau Island.

When the Medical Department had access to more resources in the 1950s, Yeo improved existing outpatient facilities and added new ones, including the Wan Chai Clinic on Hong Kong Island; Shek Kip Mei Clinic in Kowloon; and Tsuen Wan Clinic, Sai Kung Clinic, North Lamma Island Clinic, and Silver Mine Bay Dispensary in the New Territories and outlying islands.¹⁶ Under his influence, Tung Wah Hospital expanded its outpatient department with a new annex in 1956.¹⁷ Urgently required hospitals were built during Yeo's tenure, including the new Tsan Yuk Hospital (Fig), Duchess of Kent Children's Hospital, Grantham Hospital, and the aforementioned leprosarium on Hay Ling Chau. Additionally, he established the position of a specialist anaesthetist, paving the way for the development of that speciality locally.¹⁸

In recognition of Yeo's tireless efforts to improve Hong Kong's public health, the Tung Wah Hospital Board of Directors named a hospital wing after him. Furthermore, he was awarded Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George (CMG) in 1956 and made an honorary member of the British Red Cross Society. Yeo was appointed part-time Professor of Social Medicine at HKU, a position he retained until he retired to England with his family in 1957. There, he worked as a psychiatrist at St Ebba's Hospital in Epsom, Surrey for 10 years. Yeo died in 2004, aged 101.¹

Many in the Medical Department credit Yeo's success to his skilled administration. He can be summed up thus: as 'a leader who has been long the guide of our destiny, a leader we all respect for his humble sincerity of purpose, his courage and devotion to duty, his fairness and loyalty to his staff, his unassuming painstaking and conscientious leadership.'¹⁹

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