

THE
BENJAMIN
SHEARES
STORY

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BENJAMIN
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STORY

FROM PIONEERING GYNAECOLOGIST
TO SINGAPORE PRESIDENT

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“Sheares said to me ‘My life policy, especially to staff and younger colleagues, is always to help, never to harm; always do something good if you can.’”

(Footprints in the Sands of Time: Tow Siang Hwa).

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Foreword

Dr Benjamin Sheares was Singapore's most famous obstetrician and gynaecologist before he was appointed as the second President of Singapore. During the course of his distinguished career, he had delivered thousands of babies. I was one of them.

In this foreword, I shall answer briefly three questions. First, who was Benjamin Sheares? Second, why did the government choose him as our second president? Third, was he a good President?

Benjamin Sheares was born in Singapore on 12 August 1907. His father was an English man, Edwin Sheares. His mother, Lilian Gomez, was a Eurasian. Benjamin was the eldest of five children.

Benjamin studied medicine at the King Edward VII College of Medicine, graduating in 1929, with distinction. He got a job at the Kandang Kerbau Maternity Hospital and found a calling. He became an excellent obstetrician and gynaecologist, brilliant in diagnosis, skilful in surgery and kind to all his patients.

I shall refer to an example of his brilliant diagnosis. Our famous playwright Michael Chiang would not exist if not for him. When Michael's mother was pregnant with him, three Malaysian doctors told her to abort the foetus because they could not hear any heartbeat. In desperation, Mrs Chiang came to see Dr Sheares for his opinion. After examining her, he told her that the baby was fine.

He was the first Singaporean to be elected to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. He was the first Singaporean to be appointed as Professor by the University. He pioneered the lower section

caesarean operation. He was the first doctor who constructed an artificial vagina. He was admired by his colleagues and loved by his patients.

Why did the government choose Benjamin Sheares as our second President? I speculate that it was for the following reasons. First, he was from a minority community. Second, he was at the apex of his profession. He was known as the father of obstetrics and gynaecology in Singapore. Third, he was a very good man. He told his disciple, Dr Tow Siang Hwa, that, “My life policy, especially to staff and younger colleagues, is always to help, never to harm, always do something good if you can.”

He was also a peacemaker. When a dispute arose between two doctors and they were brought to see him, he would listen to both sides and offer a solution that both could accept.

In spite of these high achievements, he remained a humble man. Most importantly, he had respect for everyone. He was a filial son and supportive brother. He looked after his mother until she passed away at ninety-one. He supported his siblings and his nephews and nieces.

Was he a good president? My answer is that he was a good president. He brought to his new job, the same discipline and thoroughness as in his medical profession. He became President in January 1971. Soon after, Singapore hosted the biannual meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government. He studied the dossiers of the thirty-one leaders. He was, therefore, able to engage each of them in meaningful conversation.

He was dignified but approachable. He had a good sense of humour and could converse with anyone. He was always cool and calm.

When Benjamin Sheares passed away on 12 May 1981, he was accorded a state funeral. More than 86,000 people attended his wake. Many were in tears. The people of Singapore had come to love and respect their second President.

*Professor Tommy Koh
Special Adviser, Institute of Policy Studies
National University of Singapore*

Preface

Tradition decrees that the life of a President must be told with due decorum and substance. The story of Benjamin Henry Sheares, Singapore's second President, deserves no less, as a starting point.

This book is a modest attempt and is neither an interpretative biography nor an exhaustive opus. Instead, it presents a compendium of voices culled from various sources with attendant intonations intact as far as possible, and all laced together by a brace of observations that makes for the narrative.

Sheares is firstly remembered and hailed as Singapore's President (1971–81), a unifying symbol of a country then racing towards nationhood in substance to match its form. But what cannot be understated is his preceding role as a distinguished obstetrician and gynaecologist sustained over some fifty years, which he said is “what I enjoy most” towards the end of his life.

“He holds the distinction of a number of ‘famous firsts’,” said Professor Seah Cheng Siang. Professor Seah, described as legendary for his teaching, was a master clinician, a lion of medical education and a pioneer in advancing clinical excellence in Singapore (SingHealth DukeNUS Academic Medical Centre).

Among the accolades that abound, Sheares was lauded as the father of modern obstetrics and gynaecology in Singapore. However, it also bears notice that he presided over what was arguably the golden age of obstetrics and gynaecology in Singapore then as the challenging years of the “baby boom” rolled out.

“In 1950, births averaged over 1,000 a month (13,238 for the year). Labour wards were so crowded that patients had to be delivered on

trolleys. Length of stay was reduced to three days for uncomplicated cases. There would be only one doctor on night duty and the nurses would help ...,” wrote Ms Paulin Koh, senior nurse manager at KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital (*The History of Obstetrics & Gynaecology in Singapore*, edited by Tan Kok Hian and Tay Eng Hseon). It was also an era of towering professionals in the craft with formidable medical practitioners like Oon Chiew Seng, Tow Siang Hwa and Yvonne Salmon, among others.

Backed by sterling feats over time in his craft, Sheares entered the Istana with lofty but hard-earned regard that befits a President. This book attempts to proffer some heft to the understanding of the man in the process. A Tamil-speaking Eurasian of humble beginnings, whose brilliant career makes it difficult to categorise which were his best years and which were his finest years: as a ground-breaking gynaecologist or as a precedent-setting president.

This book started with Mr Benjamin Loh of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute who contributed several oral interviews done with some key people for the story. I thank Mr Loh for his diligent efforts.

In 2003, the Obstetrical & Gynaecological Society of Singapore (OGSS) jointly with the National Heritage Board published its landmark tome *The History of Obstetrics & Gynaecology in Singapore* (edited by Tan Kok Hian and Tay Eng Hseon). This is an enduring source and various references to its enriching material have been made in this book with much appreciation.

In addition to its own collection, it bears mention that a copy of the book was donated to the National Library by Mr Lee Kuan Yew in 2011 and ex-President S. R. Nathan in 2015.

Without ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, this book would not have been possible and to that end, I firstly thank Mr Choi Shing Kwok, Director and CEO of the Institute.

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Any omissions or errors are mine alone.

K.C. Vijayan

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