CHAPTER ONE

The Early Years

> "Education is not given merely for the purpose of earning a living. Education is learning what to do with a living after you earn it."
>
> *Benjamin Sheares,*
> *MGS Old School Pupils' dinner, 23 July 1971*

In 1907, the first recorded case of a birth by caesarean section was performed in Singapore, the same year that Benjamin Henry Sheares was born. More than thirty years and several medical degrees later, then famed gynaecologist and obstetrician Sheares was to introduce the lower segment caesarean section (LSCS) in Singapore that helped ease the pain of childbearing and prevented many potential fatalities. He also pioneered an operation known globally as the "Sheares Procedure", which involves the construction of an artificial vagina to correct the absence of one in females due to birth defects.

Sheares was born that same year in 1907 on Monday, 12 August, at home in Government store quarters, near the PUB Waterworks along Bukit Timah Road and off Mackenzie Road. This was less than a fifteen minutes' walk from where the Kandang Kerbau Hospital (KKH) was located, beside the Bukit Timah Canal. The hospital had been operating there since 1858 but did not become a maternity hospital until 1 October 1924.[1]

The *Straits Times* on 12 August that year reported the appearance of a comet early that morning at "five o'clock in a northerly direction." It was an occurrence that "may interest many of our readers" as it was expected

to make its appearance sometime in that month.[2] Given the coincidence, one is reminded of Shakespeare and half-tempted to tweak his original words and write "When beggars are born there are no comets seen, the heavens themselves blaze forth the birth of princes." Indeed, Sheares was to grow into a towering giant in his profession that earned regard befitting the dimensions of a prince in his field.

The twelve-page *Straits Times* edition for the day costing ten cents carried a cross-section of news that mirrored the wide range of life in Singapore at the time when Sheares was born. Among other things, it provided an update on an ongoing cholera outbreak, writing that fewer cases of cholera were reported to the health authorities that day than the previous Saturday. Two victims, "one dead and the other dying", were found placed on the roadway in Rochor Canal Road that morning. The Central district of the town was free from the disease.

Meanwhile, to understand what inequality looked like then, one cannot but help notice the *Straits Times* report of "an unusually large number of guests" turning up the previous Friday to celebrate and toast the coronation of King Edward VII. The event took place at the plush Raffles Hotel on Beach Road, less than three kilometres away.

There was also a slew of court cases in note form reported for the day, with unmitigated use of the word "Chinaman" to describe the relevant offenders' race. This included one who was jailed for three months after pleading guilty to impersonating a detective and possessing a cop's belt and whistle.

The paper also reported the launch of the second edition of *Handbook to Singapore* some fifteen years after the book was first published. First written by the pastor of the Presbyterian Church, Rev. G.M. Reith and revised by W. Makepeace, the book was more than a mere guide and should be "on the table of every resident in the Settlement".

"Here, one may learn not only to get from one point to another on the island, but also something reliable of its flora and fauna, its history and places of interest, its population and resources," added the report.

In foreign news for the day, among other things, serious fighting in Korea was reported between Korean garrison troops who had mutinied

against the Japanese. It followed the order to disband the Korean Army on 1 August 1907 which triggered a suicide by a Korean battalion commander. "This happened when the Guards Battalion was marched to the drill grounds where the disbandment edict was read out."[3]

By 1907, Singapore had developed in many ways since its founding as a formal trading post by the British in 1819. As the Straits Settlements became a crown colony, it came to be governed directly by a local governor and the local government. While in 1819, there were fears that Singapore as a port could not be properly defended, by 1907 such fears had been dispelled. The creation of infrastructure such as fort and artillery barracks had been undertaken. The laws of Singapore were made by the Ordinances of the Legislative Council, with the approval of the Crown of England. The Municipal Commission of Singapore was tasked with the development of the town through the maintenance of public infrastructure.

Due to Singapore's role as an entrepôt, the streets were always busy. Immigrants from all over Asia were visible in Singapore to conduct trade and business. Transportation such as "carriages, hack-gharries, bullock-carts, and jinrikishas" were a common sight. Most of the business activity occurred in Collyer Quay, Battery Road and Commercial Square (Raffles Place) where majority of the banks, postal and shipping offices were located. Prominent landmarks of the time included Bukit Timah Hill, the highest point in Singapore, where a government bungalow was situated, and which offered a view of Singapore; Fort Canning Hill; Mount Faber; Victoria Memorial Hall and the Cathedral Spire. Another important place where many Europeans enjoyed visiting was the Botanic Gardens, which highlighted the beauty of nature in the region and also served as an area of study. From a European perspective, Singapore was modernising and becoming a cosmopolitan entrepôt.

While the European perspective of Singapore highlighted the privilege that they lived in, the social situation faced by immigrants from Asia was vastly different. Endless immigration meant that the population grew exponentially, but without adequate changes in infrastructure with appropriate speed to cope with the pace. Many immigrants continued to slog amidst slums and overcrowded conditions. The absence of sufficient

air, light and drainage in these conditions where they lived led to the deaths of 1,429 people from tuberculosis in 1905. Apart from the diseases, as more immigrants came increasingly into Singapore and other parts of the Straits Settlements, many adopted opium as a habit.

Although opium was never grown in Singapore, it was imported from India, most of the time without any taxes being levied. Due to the considerable amount of income gained by opium farms, the colonial administrators were reluctant to completely ban the vice. However, many anti-opium societies agitated for the complete ban of opium in 1907.

Against such a backdrop here, Sheares' roots can be traced to his England-born grandfather who went on to serve in India in the days of the East India Company. "I was told by my grandmother that apparently the two Sheares brothers had a big rift with the family in England, and they broke away from the family and changed their name. The original Sheares was spelled Shears, there was no 'E' at the end. Apparently these two brothers migrated to India with Robert Clive, when they were with the East India Company. We're not too sure which port city. They changed their name, they put an 'E' at the end for some reason. But originally it was without the 'E'," said Sheares' nephew Maurice who was brought up by his grandmother.

"Those days Madras was known as Cannanore. They were all in the military, even the two brothers, when they came out to India, they were also in the military," he added.

One of the brothers married a soldier's daughter and their son, Edwin Henry Sheares, was born in 1863 in Cannanore (now Madras), India. In his teens, Edwin migrated to Penang where he later met and married Lilian Jane Gomez in 1902. She was born in Singapore but was brought up in Sumatra. They moved to Singapore where he worked as a technical supervisor/foreman with the Public Works Department (PWD). The couple had six children. Benjamin Sheares was their second child; their firstborn died in infancy. The others were Alice, Ernest, Emil and Mercy.

In 1912, at age five, Benjamin Sheares attended Methodist Girls' School (MGS) where he was "one of the few" in the last batch of boys to be admitted to the school. MGS was a "mixed school" where boys and

girls were brought under one roof until 1917 because of convenience. Sheares spent five years there. The school was then located at Short Street, adjoining Middle Road and Selegie Road, and Sheares could possibly have been walked to school by his mother as their home, either at Bukit Timah Road or later at Dorset Road, would have been only some fifteen minutes away by foot.

Sheares started school in an era when the study of English was encouraged as part of the education policy, to offset the high cost of importing more English-speaking staff from London to meet the needs of the developing commerce here.[4]

"I was like other children, who from the very first years are essentially 'absorbers' of what they find in their environment and love work as much as play," he recalled in a speech several decades later. He was then President and spoke as guest-of-honour at a dinner of the school's old pupils on 23 July 1971.

Among his schoolmates then were Mrs Helene Tan Chin Tuan and Mrs Ellice Handy (nee Zyberbuhler) and his principal then was Miss Minnie Cliff. He said he was allowed to study in the school until completing the Fourth Standard Government Grant in Aid School Examination in 1917. He transferred to St. Andrews School in 1918.

"Some of us may not have learnt much at school but we had the best teachers. They taught us what was really worth knowing and made us want to know it. We were taught much more than just English and Arithmetic. We were taught how to play the game; we were taught how to obey, so that later we may command. Our Old School endeavoured to send us out into the world with the will and the training to be of some use to our country in particular and to the world in general."

"Of this I am sure, that each one is proud of being an old pupil of Methodist Girls' School and wishes he or she had been worthier of that grand old Alma Mater," he said.

Sheares quipped the event was unique in the history of the annual socials as it had "an old boy instead of an old girl" giving a speech. He said there were few occasions more pleasing than to be called upon to address a group of old colleagues. "And as I happen to be a

gynaecologist, the ordeal of speaking to a bevy of Old Girls is perhaps not so disconcerting."

MGS was not the only school that admitted boys into its classes during Sheares' era. From 1912, boys were admitted to the lower classes of Raffles Girls' School as well. This continued until 1927 when they could no longer be accepted as there was an accommodation shortage.[5]

Sheares lived his early years with four siblings and parents at a time based on the small salary that his father earned.[6] "Ben or Bennie, as he was affectionately known, was a quiet boy keeping very much to himself and he loved to play at the Peirce Reservoir where his father worked."[7]

Early signs of his interest to become a doctor could be seen in his favourite game as a child. This was unusual as he was not born into a family of doctors or with links to medicine. This was in contrast to the 1960s, when his son Joseph had a less onerous decision to make in opting to study medicine in England. He was brought up in a medical environment when the family lived at KKH. According to Joseph, he developed the confidence, and medicine was a natural choice. Some of the children of other contemporaries of Benjamin Sheares like Professor Ernest Monteiro and Dr B.R. Sreenivasan also went on to become doctors.

Sheares in his early years always insisted on playing a doctor and his sister Alice, two years his junior, as the patient. On one occasion when he was six years old, he made Alice swallow a one-cent coin as a medical "pill" after which he was thoroughly spanked by his mother.[8] Indeed, Sheares was very attached to Alice who encouraged him to be a doctor even when his mother wanted him to work as a clerk upon completion of his Senior Cambridge Examinations (O-Level equivalent) to help support the family.[9]

In 1918, after five years at MGS, Sheares at age eleven transferred to St. Andrew's School in Dhoby Ghaut then. In that year, his father Edwin Sheares, who was employed with the PWD as a foreman engineer, had retired on reaching the age limit.[10] In a family of seven, it is unclear what he did to continue as sole breadwinner.

In 1922, at age fifteen, Sheares shifted to study at Raffles Institution (RI) located along Bras Basah Road to qualify to study medicine at King Edward VII College of Medicine. To be admitted to the College,

he had to sit for the Cambridge Senior Local Examination and attain a pass with credit in three compulsory subjects viz English, Mathematics and Latin as well as a pass in two voluntary subjects, preferably Physics and Chemistry.[11]

"Some of us may not have learnt much at school but we had the best possible Masters," said Sheares when speaking at an Old Rafflesians' Association (ORA) dinner in June 1971. "They showed us what the real spirit of the school was—the spirit which has made great men in the past and has made us if not great yet proud of our association with it."

Sheares was candid about his abilities to recall what he learnt at school, some fifty years on. "Is it true that on some occasions I could not answer the simplest question of Latin Grammar and should be floored by a Maths test that would be simplicity itself to a junior school dunce? Yes, Mr Chairman, I fear it is too true." But despite this, he said "something of that old school spirit" still burned in him, fifty years on, when he made the ORA dinner speech. Incidentally, the 1971 ORA dinner was to be the last at the RI grounds in Bras Basah Road, for the school shifted to its Grange Road campus the following year and the site was cleared for today's Raffles City to emerge.

When Sheares schooled at RI in 1922, the principal was David A. Bishop, during whose tenure a number of extra-curricular activities, such as football, swimming and the Second Raffles Scout Troop, were introduced. The other two Rafflesians during Bishop's decade-long tenure who gained prominence in later life were Yusof Ishak and S. Rajaratnam.[12]

The Queen's Scholarship was suspended between 1911 and 1923. This meant that neither Sheares nor Professor Monteiro, two of the outstanding RI students in 1922, had the opportunity to vie for these prestigious awards then. RI historian Eugene Wijeysingha pointed out that RI failed to win the award in 1924 all the way to 1929.

"It was a depressing period for the school. However, in 1925, it was consoled by the heartening news that Sheares and Monteiro had done extremely well at the King Edward College of Medicine. (Sheares) had claimed the Silver Medal for topping the first year medical course and (Monteiro) the Bronze Medal for coming second."[13]

To take up medicine as a career, a credit pass in Latin was a must at that time. The King Edward VII College of Medicine (KECOM) was the only institution of higher learning in the country at that time until Raffles College was established in 1929.[14]

In 1923, Sheares enrolled as a government scholar into the KECOM to begin his medical training. He won one of only three scholarships offered by the Council of the Medical College valued between $360 and $600 a year. He was awarded four medals for his stellar results and passed the Obstetrics & Gynaecology final examinations with distinctions. He gave his mother most of his $50 monthly award to support the family and continued to do so after qualifying as a doctor.[15]

At medical school, his closest friends were Ernest S. Monteiro, who later became Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at University of Malaya (1956–60), among other things, and Dr Benjamin Chew.[16]

In interview records at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), Dr Chew Chin Hin recalled that his father, Benjamin Chew, and Benjamin Sheares were the youngest in the batch. "They went into college together at the age of 15, and they graduated at the age of 21. In fact, even before attaining the age of 21."[17]

"When the two Bens were students, they were always the first in their class. Either Ben Sheares or Ben Chew. Benjamin Sheares was very close to him because they were really childhood friends. They attended the same church, they were baptised together. And in fact, he conducted the service when President Sheares died," he added.

Professor Monteiro remembered that although they were very competitive and tried to best each other at their medical examinations, they had a very warm friendship. Both he and Dr Chew would visit Sheares in his mother's house in Dorset Road and climb her many fruit trees, but Sheares preferred to study and was nicknamed the "bookworm". Professor Monteiro described him as a kind, tolerant person who never said a harsh word to anyone. Among his friends, he was always amusing and attentive to their conversations and needs. He loved sports especially tennis and table tennis, winning many trophies.[18]

As the years rolled on, Professor Monteiro was to soar on a parallel career trajectory in a separate medical speciality, comparable to Sheares

in terms of distinguished effort and achievement. Among other things, he made significant contributions in preventive medicine, such as the mass-scale vaccine used to protect children and young adults from poliomyelitis in 1958. In 1965, Lee Kuan Yew sent him to Cambodia as Singapore's ambassador where Prince Norodom Sihanouk was head of state. Professor Monteiro might have doubled as the prince's private medical adviser, given his professional expertise and Sihanouk's ailments. As ambassador, it was a salary climbdown from his medical practice days, and his "national service", as he put it, took him to the United States from 1969 to 1976. S. R. Nathan in his memoirs was to later say that "Washington is the most important of all our diplomatic postings." Nathan, who took up the post in July 1990, described his predecessors in the post, including Professor Monteiro, Punch Coomaraswamy and Tommy Koh as "exceptionally prominent and distinguished people."[19]

Professor Monteiro first came to know Lee Kuan Yew in 1946 on board the MV *Brittanic* when both were headed for London for further studies, and he was to take up the rare Queen's scholarship. "On board the ship was Lee Kuan Yew with whom I befriended, and we became good friends ever since," he said. Monteiro enrolled for the MRCP course and examinations—one of the toughest in the world—and passed in six months in March 1947. Professor G.A. Ransome cabled back to him from Singapore: "Are you kidding me or is this a joke?" No one expected Professor Monteiro to clear the examinations so quickly.[20]

Among other things, Professor Monteiro and Professor Hoy pioneered the use of the Sabin polio vaccine here despite the discouragements. "Now everyone uses Sabin, but no one has recognised their contribution or given credit," said Professor N. Balachandran.[21]

Like Sheares, Professor Monteiro was born into a family of modest means—he was the youngest in the family of ten children. Unlike Sheares, he went to school at age eleven because his family had no means of supporting him. He first picked up English at St. Anthony's Boys' School and within two years, qualified to be admitted to RI.

Professor Monteiro was also elected to the Fellowship of the Royal Society, which was a very select, restricted group. He earned himself a niche among the immortals of the British Commonwealth, said the Singapore

Medical Association.[22] The rare feat placed him alongside the likes of Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin, and Sir Frank Whittle, the inventor of the jet engine. The same issue also carried a congratulatory note on Sheares becoming president, expressing pride that a medical man had been chosen for the high office.

These snippets about Professor Monteiro are raised here because in 1970, he was also named in the media as a potential candidate for the presidency, after Yusof Ishak's death.

Lee Kuan Yew said the Cabinet considered several persons as successor after the death of President Yusof Ishak. "Dr Benjamin Sheares was the most eminent. He was so obviously a suitable choice."[23]

Returning to the present narrative, Sheares graduated from KECOM in March 1929. He would have spent his preceding medical school years, not unknowing of the backdrop of local and world events that transpired but driven by a single-minded purpose to excel and uplift himself and his family to a much higher living standard, not unlike a climb from Third World to First in the Singapore Story.

In his recent Churchill biography, Geoffrey Wheatcroft alludes to what Napoleon once said in seeking a measure of the man: "To understand the man you have to know what was happening in the world when he was twenty."

Indeed, the year 1927 when Sheares was twenty and a medical student, was not without significant financial turbulence, seminal inventions and political adjustments. It was also the year when Charles Lindbergh flew the first solo transatlantic flight from New York to Paris and the year that marked the start of talking movies with "The Jazz Singer," as the first feature length film which was to see the end of the silent film era within a decade. In Singapore, a 1927 diarist might note that Lim Nee Soon chaired the Ee Ho Hean Club in Chinatown and its members included prominent Chinese community figures like Dr Wang Chung Wei, Tan Kah Kee and Khoo Kay Hian. Incessant numbers of Chinese had arrived in Singapore in 1927, but not all remained to settle here.

Consider then the times of legendary philanthropist, educationist and entrepreneur Tan Kah Kee who at age fifty-three in 1927, faced gloomy

prospects for the rubber industry, upon which his flagship fortune was built. "The inner torment I was suffering then was really beyond words," he said. Tan reported a net loss for the year of $1.2 million ($16.3 million in 2022). Yet the earlier three years (1923–25) had seen his financial success reached the highest point in his life, making a total profit of $10.8 million. Today there is an MRT station named after Tan Kah Kee, along the Downtown Line straddling Bukit Timah Road and located near the former Chinese High School which he founded in 1919.

In Japan, the genus of Kinokuniya took root on 22 January 1927, with its first bookstore at Tokyo's famed Shinjuku district and over decades expanding abroad including, for Singaporeans, the go-to "Books Kinokuniya" in Orchard Road today.

1927 was also the year when Singapore, then a Crown Colony, inked the first agreement on water rights in Johor, allowing Singapore the exclusive right to extract water from some 2,100 acres (8.5 square kilometres) of land in Gunung Pulai in Johor. The 1927 deal was later abrogated and replaced by the 1961 Tebrau and Scudai Rivers Water Agreement.

Sheares was then just two years away from qualifying as a doctor from the then King Edward VII College of Medicine alongside six others, where the Professors of Medicine then emanated from England. Sheares' career cosmos and orientation would have been decidedly English tempered heavily by a local backdrop, with attributes intubated from Victorian medical practice.

Among his siblings, Sheares was the only one to smash through a class barrier to become an outstanding professional with an ever-soaring income that possibly exceeded the salaries of all his siblings put together. This was not without its connotations of raised living standards, a lifestyle uplift and helping his siblings as well. "God has blessed Bennie especially after the way he looked after us and me," said his mother Lilian Gomez, ninety-one, on learning he was made president in 1970.

At age twenty in 1927, Sheares, among other things, might have dreamed of owning one of the best cars someday, given that he liked high-end cars. In 1922, when Sheares was an early teen, there were about 662 cars on the roads, most of them belonging to Europeans and wealthy

Chinese, some twenty-five years after the first motor car was imported into Singapore in 1896. Sheares would also have seen the dominance and upper-class mentality of his colonial masters at work and would be hard at work, nurturing the confidence to rival, if not surpass, them in due course.

In February 1929, the General Hospital—now known as Singapore General Hospital (SGH) located at Outram Road—was opened by then Governor Sir Lawrence Guillemard. Sheares was one of nine graduates in the first batch taken in by the hospital as trainee doctors for clinical training in March 1929.

"Completing the final examinations in March 1929, I joined the government service. In the pre-Independence era, non-British doctors were appointed as Assistant Medical Officers at a starting salary of $250 a month, whereas their British counterparts were paid twice the sum," Sheares recalled later in the hospital's golden jubilee publication.[24] It is not stated why the British doctors were paid double the sum; it could be to maintain parity with their counterparts in London or to recognise expat cost of living issues or other reasons such as the belief that the colonial government practised a policy of racism and racial discrimination. The locals were treated as second-class or even third-class citizens.

Having obtained his Licence in Medicine and Surgery (LMS), Sheares was initially interested to specialise in Internal Medicine but did not get the opportunity to do so, said Professor S.S. Ratnam. Instead, he spent two frustrating years as a medical officer at an outpatient clinic in Malacca. He begged for a transfer but was told that the only available vacancy was at the Kandang Kerbau Maternity Hospital, and he accepted this offer, not by choice but for want of a better one.[25]

He was later transferred to SGH's Obstetric and Gynaecological Unit on 8 April 1931 to assist Professor J.S. English and became the first Singaporean to become skilled in this specialty. Professor English requested Sheares because he had scored high marks and had been awarded a Distinction Pass.

"I did not choose to specialise in obstetrics and gynaecology but once I got involved, I loved the discipline. In those days before the Second World War, you were just ordered to specialise by the professor if you had good

marks and I joined the Obstetric and Gynaecological Unit of the Singapore General Hospital as the professor's assistant in April 1931," said Sheares in an interview with *The New Nation* in 1976.[26]

That same year in which he anchored his medical career in obstetrics and gynaecology as the professor's assistant was also the year that he married one Madam Wong Ah Foon on 9 June 1931. She was twenty-four and he was twenty-three. They were a visible pair and there was a Dr and Mrs B.H. Sheares listed on the then P&O liner arriving in Singapore as reported in the *Malaya Tribune* dated 18 December 1936.

However, the marriage later failed, and the couple divorced. In 1939, Sheares married Yeo Seh Geok—a pupil midwife at Kandang Kerbau Hospital[27]—by possibly a customary or religious wedding. There was a picture of the couple on their wedding day, where she adorned in pristine bridal gown, and he attired in matching white suit.

Leong Wai Kum, professor at the Singapore University of Social Sciences School of Law, said, "Relying solely on the article by Dr Joseph Sheares on his father and the fact the couple had children, one may infer that they had undergone a ceremony that the community would recognise as marriage. What the local community recognised would very likely be recognised by the law as well."

"It bears repeating there are gaps in our legal knowledge. It appeared as if a Chinese, even of Christian religion, could choose to marry by Chinese custom at least until the SS Christian Marriage Ordinance 1940 that is understood to require a Christian person to choose either it or the Civil Marriage Ordinance."

Professor Leong, who is a veteran Family Law expert, added, "It will be also fair to suggest that the couple married under local Chinese custom in 1939, lived together and then, in 1948, married each other again, more formally this time, under the Civil Marriage Ordinance. The laws at the time permitted such choices to them."

Returning to the Sheares' narrative, in 1932, a year after he started in his medical speciality, Sheares was shattered at age twenty-four when his favourite sibling Alice died unexpectedly at the age of twenty-two. "They were the closest in the family, and she was a wonderful pianist. Whenever

he was taking a break from his medical studies, he would love to just sit down and listen to his sister play the piano," said his nephew, Maurice.

Her death occurred with tragic suddenness on Monday evening at the General Hospital, reported the *Malaya Tribune* on 27 January 1932. It added that news of her death would have been a rude shock to her friends as she was seen in apparent good health the previous night on Sunday, witnessing the fireworks from her residence. She then felt unwell and retired to bed, but her condition turned serious the next day, and she was rushed by car to the hospital. She died shortly after 9 p.m. despite intense medical care, leaving behind a two-year-old daughter Ruth and husband M.B. Paton of the Municipality.

Alice was described as well-liked, kind and with a smiling disposition. Her funeral at Bidadari Cemetery was well attended and lined with many floral tributes. Described as a good pianist and well-educated, she was very popular with staff and students at the Teo Hoo Lye Institution where she was a teacher.[28] The school was co-founded in 1925 at Dhoby Ghaut by business magnate Teo Hoo Lye with Rev. Chanan Singh. Mr Teo provided the premises at a rental while Rev. Singh ran the popular institution.

Alice was very much cherished by Sheares as she worked as a teacher to support the family, and this enabled Sheares to continue his studies to become a doctor and not have to work upon completing his secondary school education.

Years later, after he married and had a family, Sheares was to name his daughter Constance Alice Sheares, with the middle name inserted in tribute to his late sister. Meanwhile, his career continued to progress under Professor English, where he trained in midwifery and gynaecology, and his potential in the field was quickly recognised by his colleagues. Sheares was the only assistant in the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department and was on continuous day and night on-call duty.

In 1937, at age thirty, Sheares was posted by Professor English to oversee all the obstetric patients at the KKH, which had converted in 1935 from a leprosy hospital to a maternity hospital. As he had been keen to practise gynaecology in SGH, he took turns on obstetric duty at KKH every

alternate month. He was no stranger to hard work and his keen interest, experience and surgical skills were noted by his chief.[29]

Sheares' father would have seen his career rise with pride and lived long enough to be thrilled by the prospect of seeing his son go to London. In 1939, the same year that he got married, Sheares was awarded the Queen's Fellowship for two years of post-graduate training in London. The training was to prepare him for the specialist Member of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (MRCOG) examinations. However, the start of World War II in Europe meant he had to defer the study trip until after the war.

In May 1940, Sheares' father Edwin Henry Sheares died aged seventy-seven, after having been ill for two months.[30] Described as a well-known and respected member of the Eurasian community, he worked as a foreman engineer with the PWD and retired in 1918 when he reached the age limit of fifty-five.[31] A large turnout was reported at his funeral at Bidadari Cemetery, with a list of attendees' names recorded.

With his father's passing, Sheares was the de facto head of the family at Dorset Road. His youngest sister Mercy described Sheares as more of a father than a brother to her, after the patriarch died. "Benjamin was a counsellor, mentor and guide to me. He was also of tremendous help to me when my husband passed away in 1971."[32]

In addition to his sister Mercy, Sheares looked after his mother throughout her life, which stretched till when she suffered a stroke at age eighty-eight and was nursed at his home in Holt Road. She was ninety-one when she died on 19 February 1971. Two weeks before she died, on learning her son had become the President of Singapore, she said, "God has blessed Bennie especially after the way he looked after us and me."

His father's death in May 1940 at the beginning of that decade was to be an ominous prelude to the dreadful five years ahead with the advent of the Japanese Occupation. Sheares was then aged thirty-three. In December 1941, KKH was converted to a general hospital to treat the many casualties from the bombings by the Japanese Army, and KKH itself was not spared from these bomb attacks. Sheares was then still in charge of the two obstetrical wards in KKH.

The fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 meant that all the British doctors including Sheares' boss, Professor English, were rounded up and interned at Changi Prison and elsewhere. This meant that for the first time, local Singapore doctors were poised to take full charge of medical services for the local populace, from the urban to the rural, island wide.

The implications were profound. For instance, KKH was renamed Chuo Byoin (Central Hospital) and served as the civil general hospital for Japanese and Singaporean patients. There was a Medical Superintendent put in charge of Japanese patients while Sheares was mandated as Deputy Medical Superintendent to be responsible for the Singaporean patients.

For arguably the first time, it dawned on many that the Singaporean doctors, such as Sheares, Professor Monteiro and others, could manage the system on their own, without the British. "The expatriate doctors were all incarcerated in Changi Jail. The locals were given jobs. We literally ran the medical service," said Professor Monteiro. "The expatriates, when they left Changi Jail were acutely aware, although they never expressed it, that the local graduates came off best after their internment because all their work was done by us."

"People began to ask questions: is it necessary to have the expatriates in Singapore? I think this is the thing that led to the idea of emancipation and independence. I think we ought to thank the Japanese for giving us the idea that we could run our own business without the expatriates," he added.[33]

NOTES

1. Tan, K.H. and Tay E.H., eds., *The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Singapore* (Obstetrical & Gynaecological Society of Singapore and the National Heritage Board, 2003), p. 53.
2. *Straits Times*, "Appearance of a Comet", 12 August 1907, p. 6.
3. Ibid., p. 7.
4. M.R. Frost and Y.-M. Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography* (Hong Kong University Press, 2009).
5. B.H. Sheares, speech given at the annual dinner of the Old Raffesians' Association, 5 June 1971.

6. J.H.H. Sheares, "Benjamin Henry Sheares, *MD, MS, FRCOG*: President, Republic of Singapore 1971–1981", *Annals: Official Journal of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore* 34, no. 6 (July 2005): 25C-41C.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *Malaya Tribune*, "Funeral of Mr. E.H. Sheares", 4 May 1940, p. 4.
11. "Medical Education in Malaya", *Malacca Guardian*, 23 December 1929, p. 4.
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