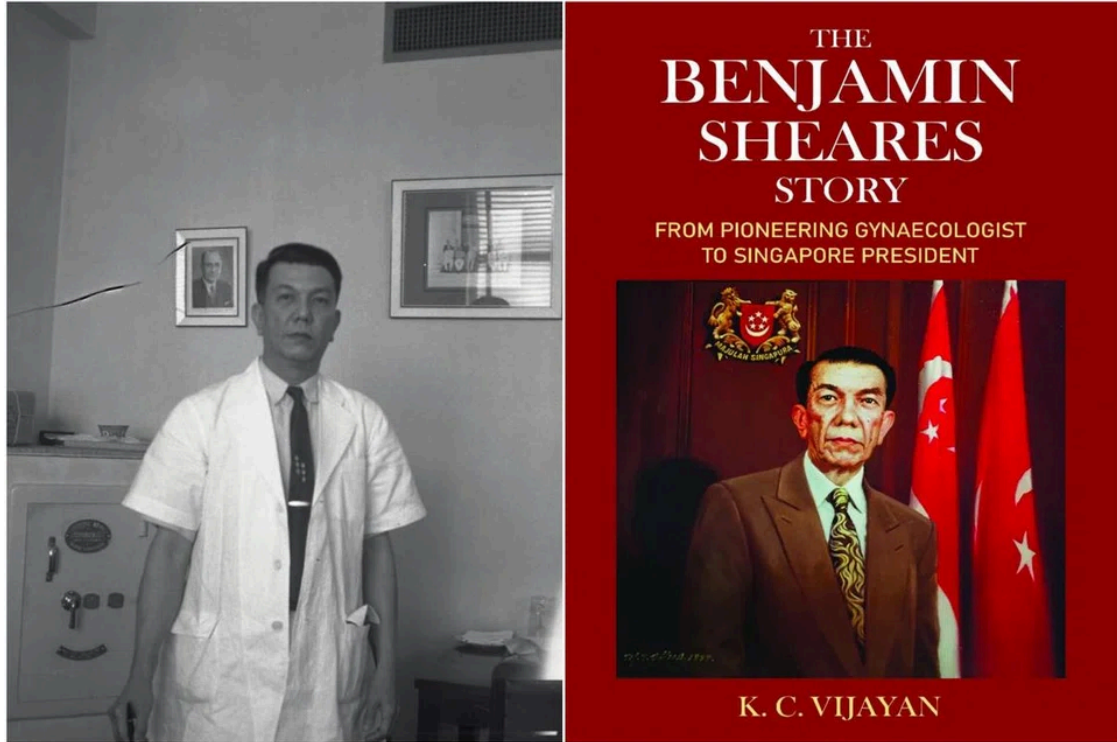


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Book review

Deeply human portrait of Singapore's second president Benjamin Sheares

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Professor Benjamin Sheares of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, University of Malaya, Singapore.

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Zakir Hussain



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The Benjamin Sheares Story: From Pioneering Gynaecologist To Singapore President

By K.C. Vijayan

Politics/ISEAS Publishing/Paperback/179 pages/\$39.13 (with GST)

When Singapore fell to the Japanese on Feb 15, 1942, British colonial officials – including doctors – were rounded up and put in prison.

For the first time, local doctors would be fully in charge of medical services for Singapore's population.

One who rose to the challenge was Dr Benjamin Henry Sheares, a 34-year-old gynaecologist who would go on to be Singapore's second president from 1971 to 1981, and whose life story is captured in a new fast-paced book by former Straits Times senior correspondent K.C. Vijayan.

It paints a deeply human portrait of how a pioneer doctor's resilience, compassion and deep conviction earned him the abiding respect of his patients and many Singaporeans.

Sheares, who was Eurasian, was a prolific student, entering the King Edward VII College of Medicine at the age of 16 and qualifying to practise at 21, whence he spent two years at an outpatient clinic in Melaka.

He begged for a transfer and was told the only available vacancy was at the Kandang Kerbau Maternity Hospital, now known as KKH or KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

Thus began a career that earned him mention as the "father of obstetrics and gynaecology in Singapore", during which he delivered thousands of babies and trained a generation of medical professionals.

Sheares was awarded the Queen's Fellowship to do postgraduate training in Britain in the early 1940s. But his hopes had to be put on hold with the outbreak of war in Europe.

Nonetheless, World War II gave him the opportunity to lead, for the Japanese military administration insisted he take over as deputy medical superintendent at KKH to oversee all local patients.

In a strange twist of fate, the Occupation meant Sheares was able to save more lives in the maternity wards.

His conservative colonial supervisor had, pre-war, refused to let him perform caesarean deliveries or C-sections, deeming them “meddling” in what nature had ordained – never mind if mothers had to be in excruciating pain or in labour for days.

Many women – and infants – died as a result, a fate Sheares felt was preventable.

“These were frustrating and heartbreaking years because I knew I was killing babies unnecessarily when they could easily have been saved,” he said much later.

Being in charge during the war meant Sheares was able to conduct lower segment C-sections – the method by which around one in three babies here is delivered today.

In the 1950s, he also pioneered the Sheares operation – a procedure to construct an artificial vagina for women born without one due to birth defects – which attracted global acclaim and placed Singapore on the medical map.

However, the pressures of the job drove him to retire in 1961 and go into private practice. He suffered from severe acute gastric ulcers, and was concerned about his family's welfare and his ability to provide for them.

Sheares continued as an honorary consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology, and set up a clinic near Raffles Place, drawing patients from the region including several members of Malaysia's royal families.

But when called upon to do public service, he would not say no – treating the poor free of charge, and performing emergency operations at night when needed.

He also held strong views on sterilisation, saying in 1959, well before the Government embarked on its family planning campaign: “It would appear inhuman if we do not allow science to control human miseries, and it would appear even more inhuman if we allow children, saved of disease, to starve or even die. The solution lies in controlling births.”

Critics accused him of “a sterility of ideas” and “utter bankruptcy of morals”, but he held firm.



President Ferdinand Marcos (left) of the Philippines and his wife Imelda Romualdez Marcos (second from right) arrived in Singapore for a three-day State visit. With them were Singapore President Benjamin Sheares (second from left) and Mrs Sheares (Yeo Seh Geok, right).

ST PHOTO: WAN SENG YIP

It would be another 10 years before Parliament passed the Voluntary Sterilisation Act, and detractors were proven wrong by the surprising

demand for the procedure.

Much of the book is devoted to Sheares' distinguished track record of professional service, a key factor considered by the Government in nominating him for the presidency following the death of first president Yusof Ishak in office in November 1970.

It proved to be a plus, judging by the reactions from regional leaders and their spouses.

Among them was Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, wife of Dr Mahathir Mohamad – former undergraduate medical students of his – who wrote a letter congratulating their ex-professor.

“We shall be losing a very distinguished obstetrician and gynaecologist. Women in Malaysia and more so in Singapore will weep,” she wrote.

“I take this election to be Harry's way of sabotaging Malaysia. He must have some other thing up his sleeve,” she added, referring to then-prime minister Lee Kuan Yew by his English name.

Vijayan also draws on interviews with family members for insights into Sheares as a father and family man, as well as on interviews Sheares gave, including to former New Nation journalist Violet Oon in 1976 recapping his career in gynaecology.

While president, Sheares also rolled up his sleeves, and went down to KKH two mornings a week to attend to poor patients and teach medical students.

Towards the end of 1980, he was diagnosed with lung cancer, but pressed on. He died in office in May 1981, survived by his wife Yeo Seh Geok, who died in 2012, and their three children.

It is a pity that Sheares did not pen his thoughts on a key period in Singapore's evolution, leaving gaps and unanswered questions that would have made the narrative more complete.

But he did not have the temperament to, as Vijayan puts it, “script his own story”.

There was no time for that, for he was always working.

Rating: ★★★★★

If you like this, read: The History Of Obstetrics & Gynaecology in Singapore (Obstetrical & Gynaecological Society of Singapore and

National Heritage Board, 2003) edited by Tan Kok Hian and Tay Eng Hseon.

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