

Healthcare Pioneers: The Dressers

Leong Ah Ng (1911 to 1920s), A Dayak Indigen (Travelling dresser, 1918), Awang Abdul Khan Bin Nor Shah (Travelling dresser, 1924 to ?), Chong Tham Fook, Pakcik Osman, Chong Yun Khui, Chin Yun Sang, Hj Ahmed Yunos Bin Hassan (Muara Port Clinic), Yapp Hiap Khoon (Flying Doctor Service), Rosli Murah, David Chiew Yuen Hwa, Hj Bassuni, Pengiran Ahmad Bin Matali (Eye and Accident and Emergency Department), Doctor Hj Hamid Bin Musa, Pengiran Hj Ahmad Bin Mustapha, Hj Sulaiman (Tuberculosis ward), Pakcik Omar, Hj Tahir (Eye Department), Pakcik Said, Pengiran Said (Tuberculosis ward), Hj Manaf Bin Awang Besar (Accident and Emergency Department) and others.



The term Dressers referred to the assistants of Surgeons or Physicians who were later known as Hospital Assistants and currently, Nursing Officers. They prepared patients and assisted in surgeries and delivered post-operative and medical cares. In fact in the earlier part of the healthcare system, they functioned as a doctor, nurse and allied healthcare professional all in one.

Dressers played an integral part in the development of the healthcare system in Brunei when it was officially established in 1907. The first dresser was Leong Ah Ng, a Chinese man who was also the State's Post Master General. It was not until 1918 that another dresser, a Dayak indigen was recruited as a travelling dresser. His services were widely appreciated, but unfortunately he died less than a year into his service. It was not until 1924 that Awang Abdul Khan Bin Nor Shah was recruited as the replacement travelling dresser. At that time, travel was by foot, bicycle or boat.

It remains uncertain how many dressers had been employed through out the history of Bru-

nei's healthcare. A list of some of the dressers is shown above. In the earlier times, there were at least one dresser in each hospital and he was the main healthcare provider. Their duties included treating minor ailments, wounds and injuries, delivering vaccinations, educating the public in health related matters, and also dispensing medications. Patients with major illnesses had to be sent to Labuan for treatment. For the most part of the 1910s, Leong Ah Ng was the sole healthcare provider until regular visits were made by the General Surgeon stationed in Labuan, beginning in 1918. Then in 1928, a permanent doctor, who later became the First State Doctor was recruited with the opening of the Kajang Hospital.

Dressers were very good at what they did. Accounts from relatives included performing operations such as emergency appendectomy when the only doctor was not available. One was even known as the 'Circumcision King'. With the expansion of the healthcare system and recruitments of more doctors and nurses, dressers' roles changed. Dressers were truly one of the pioneers of healthcare.

Guest editor: Dato Samuel Yapp Kai San (Senior Consultant Surgeon, RIPAS Hospital).

Based on interview with Mr Chin Yun Sang (Dresser/Hospital Assistant), Dato Yapp, Dato Peter Hart & Datin Marianna Hart