

# N C Tan

Pioneered cardiothoracic surgery in Singapore

**Tan Ngoh Chuan (b 1931; q University of Malaya, Singapore, 1955), died after being admitted to hospital with pneumonia on 19 May 2015.**

It was in December 1961 that Tan Ngoh Chuan—overflowing with big ideas—returned home to Singapore. Tan, later to become widely known as N C Tan, had spent two years in Australia, training in cardiothoracic surgery. Only 30 years old at the time, he was eager to establish the discipline in Singapore.

He soon found that achieving his goal would be much more difficult than he had anticipated. The medical establishment did not share his enthusiasm. At the time, Singapore was still a British colony, and most doctors were British expatriates. At Singapore General Hospital, where Tan was senior registrar in surgery, his managers had “little appetite for a newfangled, speculative subdiscipline,” such as cardiothoracic surgery, according to Tan’s daughter, Jacinta Tan.

“But my father kept the dream alive,” says Jacinta Tan, herself an associate professor of medicine at Swansea University in the UK, who specialises in child and adolescent psychiatry. “He learnt what he could anyway and bided his time and eventually was offered the chance to build up his unit, which he grabbed with both hands.”

## Opportunities after independence

Tan’s chance came in 1965, the same year in which Singapore gained independence from British rule. Tan moved to Tan Tock Seng Hospital and began the difficult task of gaining support to establish a department of cardiothoracic surgery. In the early years his team was often short staffed. Junior doctors and surgeons were reluctant to put in the long hours or to risk affiliation with a new unit focusing on surgery that entailed extremely high risks. “Everyone expected my father to fail,” says Jacinta Tan.

Tong Ming Chuan, one of many cardiothoracic surgeons later trained by Tan, said in a 2011 interview: “As a pioneer, he was very patient and had the perseverance to withstand all sorts of hardships at that time.” Tong—who in 1990 led the team that performed Singapore’s first heart transplant operation and the first lung transplant in 2000—described Tan’s dedication to the field and perseverance as “inspiring.”<sup>1</sup>

Gradually, Tan was able to attract members to his cardiothoracic team, including his cardiologist



N C Tan and wife Dixie Tan

wife, Dixie Tan, who operated the heart-lung machine during surgical interventions, and who was elected to Singapore’s parliament in the 1980s. In 1966 Tan performed the first heart valve replacement surgery in Singapore.

During the early years, the pressure not to fail was intense. After completing operations, Tan would spend nights in the hospital, hovering over his postoperative patients in case they developed complications. Over time his department became firmly established and highly respected, a magnet for young surgeons entering the specialty. Tan strove to introduce the newest treatments and technologies to Singapore, and in 1979 he performed Singapore’s first coronary bypass graft surgery.

Lee Chuen Neng, who trained under Tan, says: “He developed the entire specialty of cardiac thoracic and vascular surgery for our nation over a period of 30 years. And through this effort he trained generations of surgeons from many countries in this specialty.” He adds: “As the saying goes, we stand on the shoulders of giants. He is that giant.”

Tan was born on 7 July 1931 in Penang, Malaysia, one of seven children. He was raised in nearby Bukit Mertajam. His father was a nurse, and when Tan was 9 years old he observed his father stitching the wounds of a patient at the hospital. From that moment on, the boy wanted to be a surgeon. Tan would commute over 35 km to Penang for classes in Latin and laboratory sciences, prerequisites for university medical studies that were not offered in Bukit Mertajam.

Tan studied medicine at the University of Malaya in Singapore, where he met fellow medi-

cal student and future wife Dixie Lee. After graduating he spent six months training in obstetrics and gynaecology, followed by three and a half years of surgical training. He was awarded a Colombo Plan scholarship and in late 1959 started two years of training as a senior fellow in Australia under pioneering heart surgeons Ian Monk at Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney, and Ken Morris at Alfred Hospital in Melbourne.

In 1981 Tan returned to Singapore General Hospital as senior consultant and head of cardiothoracic surgery, and in 1988 he moved to Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre as consultant cardiothoracic surgeon, serving until he retired in 2000. He was also affiliated with the National Heart Centre, the Toa Payoh Hospital, and Changi General Hospital.

Tan was the long time editor of the journal *Annals, Academy of Medicine, Singapore*, and served as president of the Asian Federation of Cardiology, the Singapore Cardiac Society, and the Association of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgeons of Asia.

## Altruism

While serving in the late 1980s as master of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, he met Terence English, who at the time was president of the Royal College of Surgeons and later became president of the British Medical Association. The two men became friends and met regularly over the years. English told *The BMJ*: “we were both cardiothoracic surgeons, we had much in common to share and discuss.”

N C Tan and Dixie Tan were devout Christians and extremely giving of themselves. Early in his medical career, Tan helped finance medical studies for two of his brothers. Over the years, he and his wife gave generously to charitable causes and helped countless others they met during their lives, including providing financial support for young people wishing to study at universities. Later in life Tan taught Sunday school, and the couple’s eldest daughter, Grace Tan, a Stanford University educated chemist, would become a missionary. “My father was never interested in money, possessions, or social climbing,” says Jacinta Tan. “It was all about his surgery. He simply loved doing it and loved being a healer.”

Predeceased by Dixie in 2014, as well as by one of their sons, N C Tan leaves two daughters, and a son.

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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;351:h4251

**Heti Davies**



**Former consultant psychiatrist learning disabilities St Joseph's Hospital East Lothian (b 1930; q Cardiff 1958; DPM), died from a cerebral bleed on 8 October 2014.**

After her formal training at the Fountain Hospital in Tooting, Heti Davies married and moved to Edinburgh, devoting the following eight years to raising her family. She radically reshaped service provision leading on patients' rights, family therapy, and community care. Heti was seconded to the national development team and advised on the Normansfield inquiry. As speciality tutor, she inspired countless trainees. Heti leaves her husband, three children, and four grandchildren.

**William McCrea**

*Cite this as: [BMJ 2015;351:h4294](#)*

**Sally Eelin Galbraith**



**General practitioner (b 1931; q St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical School 1956), d 25 February 2015.**

Sally Eelin Galbraith (née Newton) spent the early part of her life in India and on returning to the UK was educated at Roedean School. She joined a singlehanded practice in Maida Vale and, with the help of her second husband, Alan Galbraith, built up an excellent family practice, where they both became trainers and attracted many patients from the performing arts. Sally had a deep interest in the dysfunctional problems affecting coordination in musical instrument players. After a period of study with the Society for Analytical Psychology, she developed a reputation for helping

those affected by such conditions. She leaves her husband, Alan; two children; and a stepson.

**Campbell Mackenzie, George Misiewicz, Alan Galbraith**

*Cite this as: [BMJ 2015;351:h4295](#)*

**Josephine Hague**

**Former general practitioner and aviation doctor (b 1943; q 1966), d 12 April 2015.**

Josephine Shrubbs (née Hague, aka Kingston; "Jo") hoped to become an ophthalmic surgeon, but the arrival of a daughter redirected her career into general practice in Windsor, where she had a second daughter and a son. She joined the Royal Air Force, where she gained a diploma in aviation medicine, the first female RAF doctor to do flying training. Later she became a member of the tribunal service, sat on the board of a military charity, the Lady Grover's Fund, and was trustee of the Quiet Space in Poundbury. She was buried at her own request in a coffin of Yorkshire wool on the hillside overlooking her Poundbury home.

**Roger Arnold-Shrubbs**

*Cite this as: [BMJ 2015;351:h4293](#)*

**Denise Anne Moyes**



**Gastroenterology physician Belfast (b 1972; q Queen's University Belfast 1995; MRCP), d 9 November 2014.**

Denise Anne Moyes trained in Belfast, where she had a distinguished academic record, graduating with distinction in medicine and surgery. After training in general medicine, she developed an interest in gastroenterology, working full time at the Mater Infirmorum Hospital. She was devoted to her children, and in her spare time she enjoyed walking and travel. Denise was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2011, not long after one of her children had been successfully treated for leukaemia. After an initial remission, she had a relapse in 2014. She leaves her

husband, Paul; three children; and her parents, brother, and sister.

**Laura Kenny, Aine Harley**

*Cite this as: [BMJ 2015;351:h4298](#)*

**Richard Pell-Ilderton**



**Consultant histopathologist North Manchester General Hospital (b 1921; q Manchester 1953; D Path, FRC Path), d 18 April 2015.**

Richard Pell-Ilderton ("Dick") worked briefly in a bank before joining the

army in 1939, serving in India and Burma. This experience encouraged him to study medicine on being demobbed. In 1961 he was appointed consultant at Ancoats Hospital, later moving to North Manchester General Hospital. He served on the ovarian tumour panel at Manchester University and also had a special interest in bone tumours. He published papers on phenacetin nephropathy and Waldenström's macroglobulinaemia. Dick paid painstaking attention to detail and enjoyed teaching junior staff, dedicating his whole career to the NHS. He retired in 1986. He leaves Jean Savage, his wife of more than 60 years; two daughters; a son; and three grandchildren.

**Rosie Pell-Ilderton**

*Cite this as: [BMJ 2015;351:h4296](#)*

**Peter Henry Dickinson**



**Consultant vascular surgeon (b 1922; q Durham University Medical School, Newcastle, 1945; MBE, FRCS Eng, FRCS Ed), died from metastatic cancer of unknown primary on 11 June 2013.**

In his time as a consultant at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle upon Tyne, from 1958 to 1986, Peter Henry Dickinson was one of the major figures in vascular surgery in the UK. His twin sister, Joan, started medical school with him in 1939. His qualification was delayed by six months because of a serious lung illness that required surgical intervention. The surgeon who operated subsequently married Joan. Peter won scholarships and spent a year in Chicago, which shaped a desire to develop the new specialty of vascular surgery. Peter continued to provide general surgical services and published widely. He leaves his wife, Nancy, and three children.

**Michael Griffin**

*Cite this as: [BMJ 2015;351:h4902](#)*

**Joan Campbell Griffin**



**Senior clinical medical officer (b 1922; q Durham University Medical School, Newcastle, 1944), d 29 July 2012.**

Joan Campbell Dickinson started medical school with her twin brother, Peter. In 1947 she married Selwyn Griffin, a thoracic surgeon, and supported him in the development of cardiothoracic surgery in the north east of England. Her interests were in obstetrics and gynaecology, and after bringing up three children—Anne, Valerie and Michael—she developed her own career, setting up the first family planning clinics in the north east. In 1999 she contracted bacterial endocarditis, and the subsequent treatment caused damage to her balance. She was playing tennis three times a week at this stage, and this heralded a deterioration in her health, culminating in a heart valve replacement in 2005. She leaves two daughters; a son; and seven grandchildren.

**Michael Griffin**

*Cite this as: [BMJ 2015;351:h4899](#)*