

A LOVE

MORE THAN JUST SKIN DEEP

By Dr Seah Pong Pin

IT WAS with some trepidation and doubt that I agreed to write this article for *SMA News*. You see, the first question in the guidelines they sent was: "How did you come to love your specialty?" I cannot answer this query truthfully, as I came to be a dermatologist in a roundabout way. I certainly wasn't attracted to my chosen discipline initially. Let me explain...

I graduated with an MBBS from the University of London in 1967. Subsequently, I worked as a medical officer in the neurology, dermatology and venereology departments at St Mary's Hospital in London. In 1970, towards the end of this job, I obtained the MRCP. I was in a quandary regarding the next step in my career. The registrar in the skin department then approached me to take over her duties as she was going to have a baby. This I did, thinking that it would give me more time to plan for my future. However, dermatology was not in my list of choices at that point.

After doing the rather quiet dermatology clinics for a couple of weeks, I asked my boss Dr Lionel Fry if there were any research-type projects I could do. "Yes," he replied. "I need an assistant to examine the antibody status in a group of dermatitis herpetiformis (DH) patients." DH patients suffer from coeliac disease, a gut problem related to gluten sensitivity, and Dr Fry had a substantial number of these patients in the UK.

So off I went to the Medical Research Council (MRC) Rheumatology Unit in Taplow. This centre is famous for its work on anti-nuclear antibodies, gastric parietal cells and smooth muscle antibodies. Using their techniques, my colleagues and I discovered the reticulin antibody on our first batch of the DH serum. This finding was reported as a preliminary communication in the *Lancet* in April 1971. It attracted a lot of attention, and soon became a standard screening test in many laboratories. I was advised thereafter to pursue a PhD on this antibody. Grants from the Wellcome Trust and MRC supported me for the next four years.

It was around this period that my romance with dermatology began. I looked at the subject from

a different angle, probably a more academic level than a clinical one, and slowly realised that it was a very fascinating field of study. The skin is the largest organ in the body, encompassing every science relevant to medicine and providing a very large spectrum from which to select my interests. I was blessed to pick a popular and engaging subspecialty – immunology – early on. So my PhD years were filled with intriguing research projects and meetings with many clinicians and scientists in dermatology, immunology and gastroenterology. I also produced some 30-odd publications, including five *Lancet* articles, during this period.

In 1975, after receiving my PhD, I returned to Singapore, and gradually switched my focus to clinical dermatology. The fine points of history taking, examination and diagnosis then became more apparent. As in all of medicine, one never stops learning. This continuing acquisition of knowledge has sustained my enduring interest. Today, as a dermatologist in private practice, a visiting consultant at National Skin Centre and a senior consultant at Changi General Hospital, I have a wide-ranging clinical practice, teaching which I enjoy immensely, and a large quantum of time to spend with my four granddaughters!

Thus, it is clear that this specialty was thrust upon me – I started running clinics in dermatology, and eventually ended up as a dermatologist. Such is fate! Reflecting upon my professional journey now, I feel that dermatology, despite my indirect route to it, was definitely an excellent career choice! ■



Dr Seah Pong Pin used to be a competitive swimmer. In 1959, he won three medals for Singapore at the first Southeast Asian Peninsular Games. Later, as a student in England, he represented Great Britain, after winning their selection trials. More recently, he amassed a collection of 90 guitars. Today, he spends his quieter moments singing oldies accompanied by the acoustic guitar!