**Dr Poh Soo Kai (Part 2)**

by [Teo Soh Lung](http://www.facebook.com/TeoSohLung) on Monday, October 3, 2011 at 7:31pm

ISA detainees in the 1960s and 1970s were not given proper medical care. Sick detainees were treated like sick animals and locked in cages.

Mr Chan Fook Wah was diagnosed to be suffering from advanced cancer by fellow detainee, Dr Poh Soo Kai and not the prison doctors. Not only did they fail to give him proper medical care after diagnosis, the doctors and prison authority were totally unsympathetic and negligent.

Mr Chan Fook Wah was an odd job worker. He was arrested on 17 February 1971 and released on 13 March 1978 when the ISD knew that he was near his death. For7 years, the prison doctors failed to detect  Mr Chan's illness. Even after being diagnosed as having advanced cancer, they refused to  send him to hospital for treatment. It was only after being pressurised by detainees that they  sent him to hospital.

Why did the ISD release Mr Chan when he was so near his death? It was likely they did not want to have to deal with a death in prison and a coroner's inquiry where evidence of how he was treated in prison would have to be disclosed.   Mr Chan died 13 days after his release on 26 March 1978.

The attitude of the ISD  towards sick detainees was incredible. Dr Poh himself was not properly treated when he was ill.  He nearly lost his life when prison doctors failed to diagnose his illness. It was by a stroke of good luck that Dr Poh who comes from an illustrious family of doctors, that he is alive today.

The Ministry of Home Affairs' recent refusal to set up a Commission of Inquiry is understandable.  They knew that  many former detainees suffered immensely under the hands of the ISD and that a commission may expose them to legal proceedings for compensation.

Below is the second part of Dr Poh speech delivered on 13 September 2011  in Singapore.

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**Moon Crescent Centre (MCC)**

 I was kept in solitary confinement for almost a year in this 8-cell block, the largest in Moon Crescent Center (MCC). Then I was transferred to a smaller 5-cell block situated at the extreme west end of the MCC, separated from other blocks by the administrative block. This was unofficially known as the “tough” block. I found myself in pleasant company. Chan Fook Wah, Ho Piao and Chia Thye Poh, having got advance news of my arrival, were waiting behind the door to welcome me. It was nice to be with friends again after so many months in solitary confinement.

I made it a rule not to see detainees when they were sick as I could not treat them. I always insisted that they see the prison doctor. One day, Fook Wah complained of a stomach ache, and Dr. N. Singh came, examined him at the corridor just inside the compound. It was a cursory examination. He prescribed some antacids which were delivered that afternoon. By 10 p.m. when we were all locked in our individual cells, Fook Wah called for me. He said the stomach pain had not improved with the medication, it had worsened.

Fook Wah was a very stoic person. Terribly beaten in the lock-up, he had lifted his chair and decided to fight with the ISD brutes to the bitter end. What do you do with a man who is not afraid of death? The ISD boss was called in, and he wisely told the Neanderthals to stop the torture. Fook Wah was a leader in the Chinese High School students’ movement, and had to run when the police were going after its leaders. Though coming from a rich family, he endured the privations while on the run without any grumbles. When he called me from his cell, I knew the pain must have been severe, but what could I do. So I told him I would see him the first thing in the morning when the guard came to unlock us. In the dawn’s dim light, made worse in a prison cell, I could see no jaundice, but felt a huge lump in the abdomen. He must have noticed that I hesitated, for his next words were, “Soo Kai, do not be afraid to tell me the truth. I can take whatever it is.” I told him he had cancer and it was at a late stage. I wrote a letter to the Superintendent. I am not supposed to communicate with the prison doctor. Fook Wah was transferred to General Hospital, found to be inoperable, and sent back to our cell.

Upon returning to the block, the prison superintendent wanted to send him to the Changi prison hospital which was no more than a dormitory with cages for sick detainees. It was not a hospital. We could provide him with better care in the prison block. We all objected to Fook Wah going to the prison hospital and were prepared to fight against his being transferred there. The warder came with a wheel chair. Fook Wah refused to go. The warder was sent back to tell the superintendent. After a few days, the prison relented, and agreed to send Fook Wah back to the General Hospital’s prison block. He was there for a week or so, only to be released to go home when death was imminent.

Then one day I was sent to Whitley Road Detention Centre for a few months. This time I was alone in a large open cell with a small exercise yard. You can shout to your neighbours, but you can’t see them. Dr. Toh Siang Wah, the acting head of department when I was posted to Kandang Kerbau Maternity Hospital (KKMH) in 1961, came to see me. We had a chat and he decided to send me a bible, and said he will arrange for someone to read with me. That someone turned out to be a senior officer at Whitley. I had no objection. I only insisted on reading the bible from page one. And he did not know anything from Genesis. They must have found my interpretation more reasonable, for soon the session was over.

 Sometime later, I was taken to the changing room and told to change into the clothes I was arrested in. More presentable now, I was wondering where they would be taking me to. Soon I was in the prison’s staff rest room. Tea and cakes were laid on the table. And to my surprise, I was warmly greeted by two doctors who had worked with me in hospital. They were Dr. Teo and Dr. Nagulendran. Both consultant psychiatrists at Woodbridge Hospital. They explained that they had been requested to conduct a psychiatric survey of detainees. The apparent objective was to have a psychiatric profile – like cardiac profile, or arthritic profile which I am sure you all are more used to. With this, it would save time and money to sieve through the hundreds of student applicants, etc. to higher institutions of learning. So detainees are on the way to becoming psychiatric patients, and maybe Whitley will be later known as a psychiatric hospital.

I was given forms to answer, questions ranged from IQ tests, to whether I was best loved at home. I was not going to fill the questionnaire. Then Dr. Nagulendran said the study would be absolutely secret and have nothing to do with the ISD. Further, I was free to participate or to reject participation.

I had my cakes, thanked them as I was happy to see some old friends. Told them I would decline participation. I was wondering what other detainees would do, most probably participate but give every untruthful answer they can. I was later to find my guess was right.

However, some 10 days later, I was called to the interrogation room. The sole interrogator, an inspector, put on an angry face and started by telling me that I will be punished for not participating in the survey. I smiled, and asked him how he came to know of my non-participation when I was assured by the doctors that the whole process was confidential and secret. He did not reply.

Then, suddenly I was transferred back to MCC, to my old block with Chia Thye Poh and Ho Piao.

**Brush with death**

Finally, in 1980 I was again transferred back to Whitley.  This time in Whitley, I was also kept alone in the large cell. I was taken to the interrogation room about once a week to have small talk, sometimes on health problems and read papers.

Early one morning in 1981, I had a very severe pain running from the top of my head to my neck. I must have fainted, for the next thing I knew was that the guard had spotted me lying in the yard at about 4.30 a.m. and had called the inspector on duty. They came into my cell and enquired about my condition. I said I needed hospitalization for I think intra-cranial pressure had somehow increased. They rang up their superior and told me their order was to send me back to Changi Prison. The doctor there would attend to me. So early in the morning I was driven, with a severe headache and vomiting, to Changi Prison.

The male nurse on duty was kind. He told me that Dr. N. Singh had been informed and would see me the first thing in the morning when he came on duty. It was around 6.30 a.m. I was admitted into the prison hospital. It was a dormitory with two cages at the entrance, one on each side. I was put into one. He gave me two panadol, and I felt better lying in the bed.

It so happened that morning was my family visit day. My family on arriving at Whitley was redirected to Changi Prison.  Vomiting and in bad shape, I was led along narrow corridors until I reached the visiting room. There was no intercom now. I told my family my condition and why they had sent me to Changi Prison hospital.  Has Dr. Singh seen me? No. My dad was very worried. On returning home he telephoned my brother, who contacted his friends in the Health Ministry. It was arranged that a consultant from Changi General Hospital would come to see me.

The consultant physician came at about 3.30 p.m. He recommended that I be transferred to Changi General Hospital. It was a pleasure to have nice bedsheet, and a comfortable bed after so many years in prison. But I was too exhausted to really enjoy the new environment. The neurologist thought I needed an X-ray of my skull and I was dispatched to TTSH.  They did multiple x-rays and came to no diagnosis. There was a huge mass pressing on the nasal cavity and the forehead.

The decision was to ask the neurosurgeon to come in. The operation was fixed on a Monday. I had been in the air-conditioned ward for close to a week. It must have been the air-conditioning, for a day or so before the scheduled operation, I coughed up a whole lump of mucus. The diagnosis was now obvious. I had a mucus cyst stretching from forehead to the cheek, and it had burst just in time before the operation! My skull need not be cut open. Instead the ENT surgeon was called in to operate on the very chronic sinusitis.

All went well. By the third day, when the pack left in the nasal cavity to stop the bleeding was being removed by the ENT surgeon, the wall of the cavity, weakened by continuous pressure from the expanding cyst, gave way. So, the pack was removed together with an artery that the wall was attached to. As a result, no blood went to the brain and I fainted. The only way then was to ligature the carotid, which a surgeon did. But then my heart stopped. My poor friend, the ENT surgeon frantically pumped at my chest. I was told that revived me, but I felt as if I had a fractured rib on recovery.  Lack of oxygen to the retina, and alteration in the geometry of the eye socket became my main defects. Thanks to my friends, I survived.

**My Release**

Some three months in hospital in 1981, I was served another 2 years detention order and sent back to Whitley to recuperate. In August 1982, I was told I would be released. But I was warned that I should not criticize anyone, that I would not be allowed to hold a press conference to discuss my case and the charges against me, and that the ISD would be issuing a statement on my behalf. They even called in my parents to warn them that if I were to call a press conference, I would be rearrested straight away. I would have to follow the usual restriction orders whether I signed acknowledging receipt or not.

My reply was that I was a civilized person, and if reporters knocked at my door, I would invite them in. They had better post their men outside my door and shoo the reporters away. I would definitely deny whatever statement attributed to me but not signed by me.

 I was released on Aug 26 1982, having spent all 17 years in Lee’s prison without a trial. No reporters came to see me for a few days. Then a person by the name of Mr. D’Silva from Associated Press came to my house. I told him of my restrictions and threat of imprisonment should I discuss my case. From this he could draw his own conclusion.

I was to run into him some time later. He told me that after the interview, he had gone to Albert Street to have a bite that evening. There was a tap on his shoulder and he was asked to follow the ISD officers to Whitley. He told them that whatever I said in my interview was all recorded in his tape, and they could have a look at his dispatch. They showed no interest. He was brought to the staff meeting room and sat there for the whole night. Early in the morning, he was asked to sign a statement that he had been well treated and then allowed to go. I suppose this was to frighten other foreign reporters in case they showed more courage than their local counterparts.

Harassment tactics continued. For example, when I was employed by a clinic at the airport, I was not allowed a pass onto the tarmac. Civil servants unfortunately dared not think. I just told them to ring up my clinic owner, a British nurse, and tell her that I had been denied entry onto the tarmac. So should any emergency arise, I was in no way responsible. A few phone calls followed, and I was issued with the pass.

After that short stint at the airport clinic, I started a private practice in Upper Serangoon Road before migrating to Canada in 1989.