

PRIME MINISTER'S TRIBUTE TO  
THE LATE PRESIDENT, DR BENJAMIN HENRY SHEARES,  
IN PARLIAMENT ON 12 JUNE 1981

Mr Deputy Speaker,

I rise to speak in memory of the late President Dr Benjamin Henry Sheares.

He was born on 12 August 1907 in Singapore, the son of a former Public Works Department technical supervisor. He was educated at the Methodist Girls' School, Raffles Institution and the King Edward VII College of Medicine.

I first knew him 41 years ago in 1940 when he moved into a house diagonally opposite where I was living in Norfolk Road. He was a rising gynaecologist at Kandang Kerbau Hospital. He had won a Queen's Fellowship for two years post-graduate study in Britain. He could not go because of the outbreak of World War II. During the Japanese occupation, he was to become Head of the Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology at Kandang Kerbau Hospital and Medical Superintendent of a hospital for the local patients section, in other words in charge of all other than Japanese patients.

I moved from Norfolk Road in 1944. In those 3½ years we lived opposite each other, we were not close friends. I was 15 years his junior; but we knew each other.

At the end of 1970, when our first President, Yusof Ishak, died, the Cabinet considered several persons for a successor. Dr Benjamin Sheares was the most eminent. He was so obviously a suitable choice. The Cabinet agreed that I approached him. He was surprised, delighted, and, at the same time, apprehensive. He had a flourishing medical practice in Battery Road, as a gynaecologist, and he was also an Honorary Consultant to Kandang Kerbau Hospital. At 63, he had another 5 to 10 years of effective work ahead in his own profession.

He asked for time to discuss it with his wife and family. Only after carefully weighing for several days, the implications of such a change of life, did he accept.

His humble and unassuming manner belied an intense commitment to excellence. After the war, in May 1947, he went on his Queen's Fellowship to London to be examined for admission as a member of the Royal College of

Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Within six months, by January 1948, he passed the examinations. Two years later, in 1950, when he applied for the professorship in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in the University of Malaya, he gave the Royal College as one of his referees. The Royal College disclosed that Benjamin Henry Sheares was the top candidate of his class in January 1948. In 1952, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. In 1976, the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology decided to honour him by making him an Honorary Fellow of the College, a unique distinction because he was already a Fellow.

He loved his work. He pioneered an operation named after him. Knowing this, I encouraged him to keep up his interests after he became President. He went down to Kandang Kerbau Hospital two mornings a week to attend to poor patients and to teach graduates and undergraduates. Until a few months before his death, he still went to Kandang Kerbau Hospital weekly; although at the insistence of his doctors, his workload was made less strenuous.

He was conscientious by temperament and soft-spoken by habit. He applied himself to his duties as President and discharged them with distinction.

He has been President for ten years and four months. I used to call on him regularly, about once a month, to keep in touch. He received copies of all important papers and knew of Cabinet decisions. Whenever I referred to sensitive developments concerning our security or our economy, there was always immediate cognizance of the dangers that could unfold, and he would twinkle his eyes or give one of his quizzical looks. It was his way of sharing my cares of office. He had read his papers and did not need to be told all over again.

I remember telling the House when I moved his re-election for a third term in December 1978, that I had to persuade him to accept a third term. He was conscious that he had slowed down. He said he had passed his seventieth year. He was concerned he might not have the strength to see through another term, although, he added, his mother had lived till 90 and was alert to the very end. I encouraged him to carry on. I am glad I did. He agreed after the third discussion. He did his work ably and conscientiously right to the end.

On 6 January this year, he swore in the new Cabinet. Dr Goh Keng Swee said in Cabinet, two days later, that Dr Yeoh Ghim Seng, the Speaker, had said he did not like the pallor of the President's face. I said that his doctors had reported that he had a touch of pneumonia. When he last came to open Parliament on the evening of 3 February, I urged that he should not attend the

Speaker's reception after the opening. He insisted on attending, the lingering pneumonia notwithstanding. One day, a month later, on 2 March, his two doctors, Prof Seah Cheng Siang and Prof Lee Yong Kiat, asked to see me. I had a premonition of bad news. When I saw them at 2.45 p.m., they were accompanied by Dr Chow Khuen Wai, a senior radiologist. The latest x-ray showed two nodular opacities on the right lung. They originally thought they were caused by pneumonia. They had already given him a course of antibiotics. Since the opacities had not cleared up, the pneumonia was likely to be an infection overlying a malignant lesion. They proposed another course of stronger antibiotics to be given intravenously. But they were not optimistic.

The question was whether the President or the family should be told that he had cancer. I asked the doctors whether as a doctor the President would know it. They said that he was a very experienced clinician in a cognate discipline. He had seen his X-rays before and after the course of antibiotics. They believed he would know how to interpret the X-rays. They decided not to tell him. Instead, they told Mrs Sheares.

I saw him more frequently towards the end, once a week, to comfort, to console. He was a methodical man. He has noted in his diary the day when he had his first touch of flu in November last year. It was not flu. I believed that he

knew by March what is portended. His first response was to go away for a break. I encouraged him. Plans were made for him to take a break in Taipei, Tokyo, Honolulu and Manila. A week before his travels in April he called me. He apologized for the work and the trouble done to prepare for his journey. He felt he was not up to the travel. I said there was no need for any apologies. It was quite understandable. He felt remorse at having put so many people to unnecessary work. He was always considerate. I told him the travel plans were not wasted. They could be restored if he felt up to it. He said another reason for putting off the journey was to see his two grandchildren who were schooling in Britain. They were flying back during the school holidays. In his thorough, methodical way, he sorted out his affairs and said his farewells. He saw his grandchildren; he made his will; he left no loose ends. He tidied up everything he could think of.

I remember that I wrote to the Speaker just before he went for his holiday to Spain on 24 April. He was one of the President's friends. I had been saying goodbye to the President in instalments. I felt that the President would want to see him before he left for his holidays. I am glad the Speaker did so on 24 April. He spent an hour and a half of the morning with him, giving him some company and some comfort.

I went to see him several more times, once on the Sunday morning of 3 May. I was told he had blacked out in the early hours of the morning. They believed it was a “drop attack” from brainstem ischaemia. When I saw him at 2.30 p.m. lying in bed, he asked in a whisper what the doctors had told me. He was perfectly lucid. His hands folded on his chest were warm from a fever when I placed mine over his. I told him that the doctors were outside and that I had not yet had a discussion on his latest symptoms. It was a game he and I played for nine weeks from 2 March. I comforted him and told him to rest. Only once, in his office, did he tell me that at his age his lung problem was likely to be malignant. He said it in a soft matter-of-fact way, and gave a gentle sigh. There was sadness, but there was no fear nor panic in his expression or his bearing.

On the morning of Friday, 8 May, I received a message from his secretary that he had asked to see me. I went to his home at Holt Road at 12.45 p.m. He was having his lunch alone. He had walked downstairs from his bedroom. He invited me to sit down with him. He sat up erect. He expressed his concern and regret that he had not been to office for nearly ten days. There were several Ministers of State who had been appointed and had not been sworn in. He suggested that he should retire. He felt it was not right that he was unable to do his duties. I demurred. I said that the Speaker was expected back from his holidays in a few days and that he could act as Vice-President. The Ministers of

State could be sworn in before him, and further that all duties which required the President's physical presence, the Speaker, as Acting Vice-President, could discharge them. He appeared reassured. We chatted desultorily over his poor appetite. I left after 20 minutes. He was calm and collected.

That evening at about 8.15 p.m. as I was at dinner, I received a message from the doctors that shortly before 6.00 p.m., the President had had cerebral haemorrhage and had gone into a coma. His family was with him. I asked if he was likely to recover consciousness. They did not think so. I decided not to intrude. I thought it better to remember him as he was when I saw with him earlier at lunch.

On Tuesday, 12 May, he died. It was kinder that the end came suddenly through a cerebral haemorrhage. That night, I asked his son, Dr Joseph Sheares, if his father knew of his cancer. He thought he did. I asked him why he thought so. He explained that for the last few months, each time he had seen his father, the father had asked for his chest to be examined. He used to listen with his stethoscope and report his findings to his father. About four weeks before his death, he stopped asking for chest examinations.

During those harrowing weeks, at no time did I see any fear or panic in his eyes or in his expression. There was sad resignation. I do not know what black periods he went through on his own. He displayed none each time we met. He had great composure and dignity, right to that last lunch on Friday, 8 May.

He has passed from us. But he will always live in my memory, though when he died, a part of me also died. When a friend dies, the shared conversations, the shared experiences, the bonds of friendship can no longer be renewed. It is as if a thread has snapped. The thread is still there, but the person holding the other end had loosened his hold. The thread is slack. He had given me a lesson on how to die, how to leave this world in grace and in dignity.

A Chinese proverb says “盖棺定论” - gai guan ding lun - when the coffin is closed, only then is an assessment conclusive. I have no doubt that the thousands of Singaporeans who paid him their respects were right in holding him in high esteem. He deserved their respect, for he discharged his duties with dignity, with thoroughness, with consideration for others.

His contemporaries who knew him in his youthful days have told me that he was a lively man of great zest, not incapable nor deprived of merriment. A close doctor friend and a former student of his, Prof Seah Cheng Siang, has

written this to me of the President in his middle years: “And this could be said of the late President Sheares. As a doctor, he answered every call for help from every patient, be he rich or poor, known or unknown, important or unimportant. He was always there. As a teacher, he had always the interest of the student. There were days when he taught in the corridors of the old Kandang Kerbau Hospital, now demolished, on Sunday mornings as extra tutorial. As a person, in his words, he was always sincere; in his handshake, always warm, and in his looks, always friendly.” In his later years, he acquired a mature balance, a sense of tranquility that made his life one worth of having been lived.

As I wrote out this tribute I felt sadness. I did not feel grief. He has lived a full and a good life. He was a good man, who put his ability in the service of his fellow men. I know Honorable Members will also want me to extend our sympathies to his widow, to his children and their spouses, and to his grandchildren.

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