

Sister Mary Gabriel O'Mahoney

A Celebration of a Remarkable Life

The passing of Sister Gabriel, FRCPE, MBE, marks the loss of one of the most remarkable physicians ever to have practised in Hong Kong. Having graduated in medicine from University College Dublin in 1947, she served as an intern at the Carney Hospital and Boston City Hospital in the US. Following further training at the Brompton Hospital in London, in 1950 she joined the medical staff at the Ruttonjee Sanatorium in Wanchai, where she worked tirelessly until retirement in 1988. Together with Sister Mary Aquinas and Sisters from the Order of Saint Columban, they established a formidable team and earned an international reputation for treatment and clinical research directed at tuberculosis.

Whilst being a dedicated and caring physician, Sister Gabriel was prolific in research, published widely on many aspects of adult and childhood pulmonary tuberculosis, orthopaedic and meningeal tuberculosis as well as asthma and allergy. There was extensive collaboration on pulmonary and spinal tuberculosis involving the British Medical Research Council. Altogether she authored and contributed to more than 100 scientific papers. Together with other physicians in the Hong Kong Chest Service, Sisters Gabriel and Aquinas championed *Directly Observed Treatment Short Course* (DOTS) decades before its importance was recognised globally.

Hong Kong can be rightly proud that a number of medical research disciplines have contributed significantly to clinical practice worldwide. The management of tuberculosis stands firm amongst that list, as today many of the standard treatment regimens are based on research conducted in Hong Kong. Sister Gabriel was central to that special contribution, which includes landmark papers in spinal and meningeal tuberculosis that are unsurpassed even today. The contributions did not go unrecognised; she was the first ever Honorary Fellow of the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine and was admitted as a Member of the British Empire in 1990.

To students, she was a dedicated and charismatic bedside teacher. A whole generation of Hong Kong doctors were trained by her. Her perspective was invariably focused on the patient, often humorous, and always inspiring. The tea and biscuits and informal discussion after the formal teaching were especially appreciated!

As a physician, Sister Gabriel earned a reputation for exemplary clinical care and compassion. Living in the hospital she was always on call, providing reassurance to young clinicians unfamiliar with the dramas and clinical quandaries that tuberculosis can evoke without warning. She was noted for her extraordinary sense of compassion with particular affection for the poor and disadvantaged.



Sister Mary Gabriel O'Mahoney (1921-2006)
Source: Hong Kong Tuberculosis, Chest and Heart Diseases Association

Even on her last evening in Hong Kong prior to retirement in Ireland, she was delivering food to street sleepers in Yaumatei on a cold winter's evening, which was typical of her deep devotion to those less fortunate than others.

In her later years, she focused her energy on hospice care. The Columban Sisters, together with many colleagues and friends and the Society for the Promotion of Hospice Care, established a dedicated facility to care for the terminally ill at the Bradbury Hospice. Again, she set up a trend that others would follow.

In the last year of her life, Sister wrote a book titled *A Time of Transition*, which documents the contribution of the Columban Sisters to many aspects of medical and social care in Hong Kong. In it she recounts their unique legacy with typical modesty and good humour.

With her extraordinary zest and distinctive approach to life, Sister would never have condoned the sadness that her legion of friends now feel at her passing. Hers was a life lived with outstanding compassion, enthusiasm and optimism, and surely that is something that we should treasure and celebrate. I believe Sister would agree.

M Humphries, FRCP, FRCPE, FHKCP, FHKAM (Medicine)

An abridged version of this article also appears in *Synapse*, the official publication of the Hong Kong College of Physicians.