

Professor Gerald Choa and the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences

TW Wong, FHKAM (Emergency Medicine)

Member, Education and Research Committee, Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences Society

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In 2026, the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences (HKMMS) will celebrate its 30th anniversary.¹ The building that houses the Museum, namely the Bacteriological Institute, will have stood for 120 years.² The Bacteriological Institute was built in 1906 in the aftermath of the bubonic plague epidemic that ravaged Hong Kong.² For many years, it served as the public health laboratory and vaccine producer for the Colony, safeguarding the health of the population.² Its name was changed to the Pathological Institute after the Second World War, and it continued to play an important role as the main government laboratory until 1960, when a new facility was established in the Sai Ying Pun Jockey Club Polyclinic.³ The Old Pathological Institute continued vaccine production

until the 1970s, after which it became a government store.⁴ It was given a new lease of life in 1990, when it was declared a protected monument under the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance.^{2,4} The Hong Kong College of Pathologists led the bid for the site to be run as a medical museum.¹ A Museum Steering Committee was formed in 1992 to submit proposals to the Government, and Professor Gerald Choa volunteered to join the Committee. The bid was successful and the HKMMS Society was formed in 1995 to manage the future museum, with Professor Choa as its founding Chairman.⁵ The Museum was opened on 22 March 1996 by Mr Christopher Patten, the then Governor of Hong Kong (Fig 1).

Professor Gerald Choa (1921-2001) was a



FIG 1. Professor Gerald Choa (centre), Professor Faith Ho (left) and the then Governor Mr Christopher Patten (right) at the opening ceremony of the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences on 22 March 1996. Image courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences Society

distinguished physician whose achievements as a clinician, administrator and educator are well recognised.^{6,7} He was the first Chinese doctor to be appointed to the rank of Specialist in Medicine by the Government in 1956.⁵ He became the Director of Medical and Health Services in 1970 and helped to modernise the healthcare system.⁶ After retiring from Government service in 1976, he took up the challenge of establishing a new medical faculty at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, serving as its founding Dean.⁶ Less well known were his interests in, and contributions to, the scholarship of medical history of Hong Kong.

Professor Choa's interests in history appears to have developed early. From the 1960s, he was a life member of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. At a symposium organised by the Society in 1966, he delivered two lectures on Chinese traditional medicine⁸ and Chinese concepts of food and diet.⁹ He also wrote an article on the history of medicine in Hong Kong for the first edition of *The Medical Directory of Hong Kong* (1970), probably the first comprehensive account of the subject.¹⁰ As head of the Medical and Health Department, he had the rare opportunity to access a bound volume of reports handwritten by the Colonial Surgeons between 1845 and 1859. Despite his busy schedule, he published a book in 1981 titled *The Life and Times of Sir Kai Ho Kai*.¹¹ Dr Kai Ho (1859-1914) was the first Chinese graduate of the medical school of the University of Aberdeen, graduating in 1879. He served as a member of the Legislative Council from 1890 to 1914 and was a leader of the local Chinese community. Although he did not practise medicine in Hong Kong, he was instrumental in many medical developments of his time. He donated funds to the London Missionary Society to build the Alice Memorial Hospital in 1887, named in memory of his wife, Alice Walkden, who had died a few years earlier. He was one of the founders of the Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese, which used the Alice Memorial Hospital as its teaching hospital, and he also served as the founding chairman of Kwong Wah Hospital, which opened in 1911. Professor Choa's work on Dr Kai Ho was hailed as an important contribution to local history, and a second edition was published in 2000. His second book titled *"Heal the Sick" was Their Motto: The Protestant Medical Missionaries in China* was published in 1990 and recounted the work of Protestant medical missionaries in China from 1834 to 1949.¹² It details their role in introducing Western medical education to China and Hong Kong. After retiring from The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1986, he wrote further on the history of medical education in Hong Kong¹³ and on the influence of one of its most distinguished students—Dr Sun Yat-sen.¹⁴

Professor Choa made an important

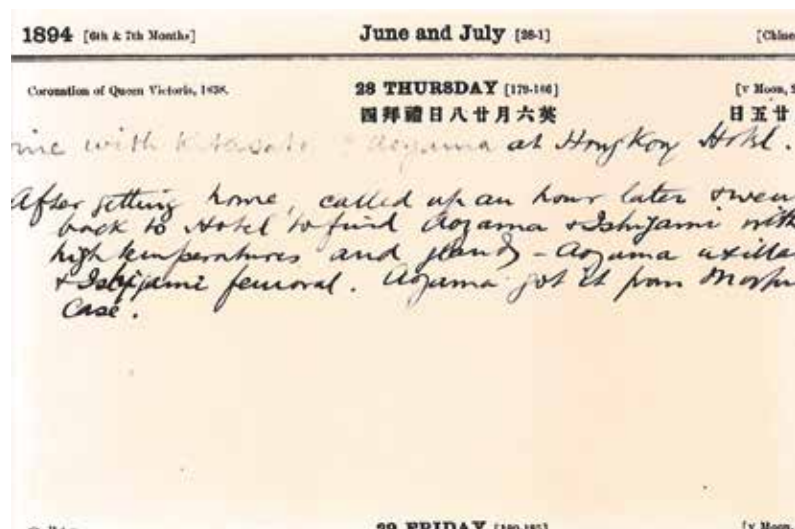


FIG 2. Dr James Lowson's diary entry on 28 June 1894. After dining with Professor Shibasaburo Kitasato at the Hong Kong Hotel, Dr Lowson was called back to the Hotel to see Professor Tanemichi Aoyama and Dr Toru Ishigami who had caught the plague. Image courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences Society

contribution to our understanding of the early phase of the 1894 plague epidemic in an article based on Dr James Lowson's diary.¹⁵ Dr Lowson was the Deputy Medical Superintendent at the Government Civil Hospital and was directly involved in managing plague patients during the epidemic. His diary serves as a valuable primary source on the evolution of events and the response to the outbreak (Fig 2). The diary was preserved by his granddaughter, Mrs FM Ashburner, who happened to read a newspaper interview with Professor Faith Ho in 1993 about the establishment of a new medical museum. She donated a copy of the diary to the future museum, where it remains one of its most valuable possessions. In addition to detailing day-to-day events and the measures taken, it records the diarist's conflicts with the authorities, information unlikely to appear in official reports.

As Chairman of the newly opened Medical Museum, Professor Choa played a leading role in educating the public about Hong Kong's medical history. Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital held its 110th Anniversary Exhibition at the Museum in 1997. As part of the programme, Professor Choa delivered a lecture titled *History of Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital and Hong Kong College of Medicine*. He handed over the baton to Dr Tak-fu Tse in 1999 and passed away in 2001.

The Gerald Choa Memorial Fund of the HKMMS Society was established in 2002 with donations from Professor Choa's family and friends to support research into Hong Kong's medical history and related Museum publications. The first

project was a book on the history of medicine in Hong Kong, published in 2006 to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the HKMMS.¹⁶ It is dedicated to the memory of Professor Choa, who contributed greatly to the scholarship in local medical history and to the establishment of the Museum.

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