

Medical museums should inspire rather than macabrely horrify

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Introduction

The Siriraj Medical Museum was valourised as an “educational, entertaining and eviscerating (tonic) if you’re feeling jaded by all the temples, malls, eateries and other entertainment in Bangkok...there you’ll find a mummified serial killer, giant testicles and touch exhibits for the blind” (Bangkok Post Travel, 2014). Diseased and damaged organs, murder, death, illness and disease abound. A donor cadaver to help anatomy teaching was a rare reprieve. The touch exhibit speaks to the challenges the visually impaired face. I left Siriraj dejected. My sojourn to Sarawak’s Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial (LKHHMM) Museum refreshingly testified to “the admirable nature of human goodness.” My parents suspected school truancy as the week-long incentive for refusing to move my sore arm. I had only fallen gently from bicycle onto grass. Now exasperated, they consulted Dr Wong Soon Kai, who diagnosed an elbow fracture that required manipulation under a general anaesthetic.

To this day, when I look at one elbow bent outward at an unnatural angle, I remember Dr Wong believing the fearful child cradling his sore elbow against his chest. This gentle surgeon had proven my parents wrong! Dr Wong was an all-rounder, the first Sarawakian to graduate as a surgeon in Britain, performing general surgery, ear/nose/throat, eye and orthopaedic surgery. His extensive repertoire nowadays encompasses the remit of quite a number of surgical specialists.

It is gobsmacking that this “jack of all trades” generalist was Sibü’s sole hospital surgeon for 15 years.

LKHHMM’s surgery section memorialises a surgeon devoted to the well-being of his town folk. The pioneer, Lau King Howe, a Fuzhou philanthropist whose funding covered half the set-up costs from rubber and shipping earnings, meant a hospital named in his honour was opened in 1936. LKHHMM serves to “commemorate the profound love and noble deeds of Lau King Howe and to tell the medical history of Sibü.” In the Intensive Care exhibit, I marvelled at the single East Radcliff respirator, which if already in use, required nurses to “hand bag” to augment of breathing of a second anaesthetised patient for days.

Malaysia’s only medical museum praises the “admirable goodness of human nature.” Rather than focusing on rare or odd medical equipment and fascinating pathologies, the exemplary lives of a surgeon and a founding philanthropist are highlighted. Medical museums such as LKHHMM celebrate the foundation staff that make clinical care possible, pivoting away from rare patient pathologies housed in other medical museums, to what makes hospital ecosystems tick: their people and enlivened recent and remote history.

References

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