
HEROES OF HPB

PROFESSOR BALASEGARAM MANICKAVASAGER

Remembering Malaysia's Pioneering Liver Surgeon



Professor Bala as a young and handsome surgeon

EARLY LIFE

Dr Balasegaram or better known as Prof. Bala was born on the 15th of April 1929 to a poor and underprivileged family. This did not deter his ambition to become a doctor winning a state scholarship to study medicine at Singapore's King Edward VII College, earning an MBBS in 1955. Trained under Thomas Thornton and also at the world renowned Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, he achieved the Fellowship from both the Royal colleges of England and Edinburgh in 1960.

PIONEERING LIVER SURGERY IN MALAYSIA

Prior to World War 1, the liver had been an organ not many dared to venture into. For Dr Balasegaram Manickavasager, fate colluded to a career in working with the liver. In the 1960s, he saw considerable liver trauma among road accident victims in Seremban Hospital. Without seatbelts, drivers often suffered liver trauma on hitting steering wheels in accidents. Dr Bala was credited with pioneering work in liver surgery, which included studies on liver cast, resection and the creation of the Bala clamp. At a time when liver anatomy was poorly understood, he dedicated his time to the creation of liver cast by injecting coloured rubber latex into cadaveric livers to study their anatomy. He then went on to develop an atraumatic clamp for the liver called the "Bala Clamp" manufactured by the Down Brothers in London.

BREAKING THE RACIAL BARRIER

Invited as an “Honorary White” lecturing in South Africa.

First Asian to be honoured by the Royal College of Surgeons of England as a **Hungarian Professor (1969)** and the First Asian to win the coveted **Jacksonian Prize (1971)**, the highest prize in Surgery.

Honours from the Irish College of Surgeons and the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh - respectively the **Abraham Colles Lecture** and the **Chienne Memorial Lecture**.

As a leader, everyone remembers him as a stern but fair person, always echoing in their minds his famous saying during ward rounds:

“In my ward, no one is higher than the patient in front of you”

- PROF BALA



Above: Bala clamp.

Below: Clamp used during liver surgery (courtesy of Department of HPB Surgery Hospital Sultanah Bahiyah)



Professor M Balasegaram (front row, seated 2nd from left) and his doctors with a distinguished visitor; circa 1969.



Scenes in Kuala Lumpur May 13 1969

REMEMBERING A HERO

In 1969, Dr Bala formed the first Hepato-biliary and Pancreatic unit in the country that was instrumental as a referral centre for the entire region. Such was his fate that later that year, his unit was called upon into the firing. Racial riots and mass killings in the nation started just a few blocks away from the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital. Chaos in the city with interracial killings led

many to flee and hide. However, facing uncertainty, fear, and the unknown, Dr Bala and his team worked tirelessly. Limited by resources, but not lacking in grit, determination and passion, the entire team managed to weather the storm.

AWARDS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Dr Bala later wrote many published articles on the management of civilian trauma, including an editorial in the *American Journal of Trauma*. In 1970, he won the Jacksonian prize in surgery from the Royal College of Surgeons and a year later was awarded the Hunterian Professorship. The Abraham Colles lecture was delivered in Dublin in 1974 just weeks before a bomb went off there.

HEPATIC SURGERY: PRESENT AND FUTURE

Hunterian Lecture on 10th March 1970

by

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MY INTEREST in hepatic surgery was stimulated eight years ago by the high incidence of malignancy (especially primary hepatomas) and the annually increasing frequency of severe blunt liver injuries in Seremban. Because hepatic disease can only be diagnosed, assessed and operated upon along a predetermined plan if one has complete understanding of the anatomy of the liver, coupled with all the information that recent diagnostic aids can give apart from a careful history and clinical examination, studies of hepatic anatomy and of the recent diagnostic aids in detecting hepatic disease were undertaken. These studies enabled an analysis of the results of my series of 40 major hepatic resections to be made.

A WORLD RENOWNED SURGEON

Dr Balasegaram's work in the field of liver surgery, particularly in the field of trauma propelled him into a world renowned surgeon. This experience was shared in his teachings and published articles world over, bringing with it a different dimension of management in liver trauma and civilian casualty management.

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