

OBITUARY

A TRIBUTE TO THE FATHER OF RADIOLOGY AND ONCOLOGY IN HONG KONG—THE LEGEND OF JOHN H. C. HO, M.D.

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Our most respected mentor, Dr. John H. C. Ho, passed away peacefully on August 10, 2005 (Fig. 1). He was deeply respected as the father of radiology and oncology in Hong Kong, and was fondly nicknamed “Emperor Ho.” He was decorated Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for his outstanding service. His contributions to our profession were profound and far reaching. His legend is an inspiration to all.

Dr. Ho was born on July 6, 1916, the Year of the Dragon. He was a unique character with tremendous self-confidence and absolute determination, a great visionary who excelled at creating opportunities to turn his dreams into reality.

He was a selfless patriot. Soon after his graduation from the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and his marriage in 1940, he volunteered for service in the Red Cross under the Chinese Defense League and worked in army field hospitals across China until the end of the war in 1945.

He was a brilliant scholar. With a scholarship awarded by the British Council, he started studying radiology in London in 1946. Besides obtaining higher qualification in internal medicine (awarded membership in 1947 and fellowship in 1963 by the Royal College of Physicians), he was one of the very few who was given fellowships in both diagnostic and therapeutic radiology by the Royal College of Radiologists (United Kingdom).

Dr. Ho was a very caring doctor, with exceptional acumen. To his patients, he was both a trusted friend and a savior who brought them hope and good cheer. Had he so desired, he could have set up his own lucrative private practice. Hence, many of his grateful patients gave generous donations to support his quests.

Dr. Ho was a most dedicated and outstanding leader. He was the director of the entire public service in both diagnostic and therapeutic radiology in Hong Kong from 1950 to 1985. At a time when oncology was poorly recognized, he had to fight through much bureaucratic red tape to build the whole spectrum of cancer services from scratch. Because the development of cancer services was not a gov-



Fig. 1. Dr. John H. C. Ho (1916–2005).

ernment priority, many of his ideal goals had to be implemented through private donations.

When he first took over the service, the small department at Queen Mary Hospital had only one 400-Kv Maxima and no hospital beds for patients requiring external radiotherapy. In 1956, with financial support from Oxfam, he built a hostel with 32 beds and obtained a donated van to transport patients to the department for daily treatment. In 1964, with a generous donation from the Royal Jockey Club, he set up the Institute of Radiology and Oncology, well equipped with the most advanced equipment of the time, at Queen Elizabeth Hospital. In addition, he founded the Hong Kong Anti-Cancer Society (HKACS), a charitable organization through which he built the first hospital (Nam Long Hos-

pital) dedicated to cancer patients requiring terminal care or prolonged convalescence.

Besides serving to promote public education, proactive prevention, and early detection, the HKACS also provides badly needed financial support for research and to help needy patients. It was with this extra funding that Dr. Ho established a Radiobiology Unit with laboratories for cell culture and experimental animals, thus providing the infrastructure for basic science research.

Another important contribution was the establishment of the population-based Hong Kong Cancer Registry to monitor the incidence and mortality rates of cancers in the territory. This provides valuable data not only for comparative epidemiologic and clinical research but also for planning cancer services.

Every bit of expansion was hard earned, but Dr. Ho built up such an enviable service that it was the most respected professors of medicine and surgery of HKU who first started calling him “The Emperor,” a nickname fondly used by his disciples ever since.

Emperor Ho was a great boss. He was an authoritative figure, but he was also very caring and fatherly. He always preached that cancer treatment must be based on scientific evidence, and if there was none available in the literature, one should try to secure the evidence through research. To all his staff, Emperor Ho was a role model with impeccable integrity, a constant source of strength.

Dr. Ho was a great educator. He was one of the longest-serving professors at HKU (Honorary Lecturer in Radiology since 1950 and Honorary Clinical Professor of Radiation Oncology since 1983). He set up intensive training programs not only for radiologists and oncologists but also for medical physicists and radiographers. Furthermore, he established the linkage with the Royal College of Radiologists to conduct conjoint fellowship (F.R.C.R.) examinations annually in Hong Kong since the late 1970s. This arrangement greatly facilitates not only local trainees but also those in other Asian countries.

Nearly half of the doctors in Hong Kong were once his pupils; four generations of department heads in major radiology and oncology centers can trace their lineage to Dr. Ho as their original mentor. Hence, when he retired from public service in 1985, his pupils and colleagues from all disciplines worked together to set up “The Ho Hung-Chiu Medical Education Foundation” to continue his spirit through sponsoring of training, scholarships/fellowships, and research. The Foundation Lecture, delivered by the world’s most renowned scholars, is another precious legacy from Dr. Ho.

One of Dr. Ho’s greatest achievements was his monumental work on nasopharyngeal carcinoma (NPC), a cancer prevalent among Southern Chinese. His bold postulation that early exposure to preserved foods is an important causative factor and the discovery (in collaboration with other scientists) of a strong association of Epstein-Barr virus with NPC have led not only to a better understanding of its carcinogenesis but also to possible means for prevention and early detection. He strongly advocated that a custom-

ized staging system should be used for NPC because the natural behavior and therapeutic considerations are grossly different from other head-and-neck cancers. The current staging system by the International Union Against Cancer (UICC) and the American Joint Committee for Cancer Staging and End-Results Reporting was largely based on his concepts. The radiotherapy technique that Dr. Ho designed was one of the finest two-dimensional techniques at that time, and the achievement of 5-year disease-specific survival of 52% during the period 1976–1985 was the first breakthrough for what used to be an inevitably fatal cancer.

The honors that Professor Ho received are phenomenal not only in terms of number but also in terms of global extensiveness. The most prestigious ones include the following:

- In Europe: Order and Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Cavaliere of the Order “Al Merito della Repubblica Italiana” by His Excellency The President of the Republic of Italy, the 32nd Skinner Lecture by the Royal College of Radiologists, Certificate of Appreciation by the UICC, the 1st Werner Henle’s Memorial Lecture, and the Award by the International Association for Research on EBV and Associated Diseases
- In North America: Honorary Fellow of the American College of Radiology, the first Gold Medal and Inaugural Lecture of the del Regato Foundation, Gold Medal and the 5th Annual Lecture of the Gilbert H. Fletcher Society, Gordon Richards Memorial Lecture by the Canadian Association of Radiologists, the Albert Soiland Memorial Award
- In Australia: Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Radiologists of Australasia
- In Asia: the 1st Sir Patrick Manson Gold Medal, Honorary Doctor of Science, and the 6th Digby Memorial Lecture by the University of Hong Kong, Award by the Asian-Oceanian Congress of Radiology, Honorary Fellow of the Hong Kong College of Radiologists

With his warning against the Southern Chinese habit of feeding babies at weaning age with salted fish and a gradual change to a Western diet, the age-standardized incidence rate of NPC in Hong Kong dropped by more than 40% over a 25-year period (1975–1999). Furthermore, thanks to the enthusiasm that he inspired in his disciples, treatment results have further improved, to a 5-year survival rate of 80% for patients treated in recent years (1996–2000). All these were the fruits of the seeds that Emperor Ho sowed during his reign. It was his lifelong crusade against cancer that led to both the cure and prevention of a major cancer in his home country.

With all his eminent contributions to our profession, no words could adequately express our profound respect and gratitude for the unique heritage that he gave us. We earnestly hope that this brief account will bring loving memories for all his friends and, above all, inspiring messages for younger generations. A tribute to a Great Giant—Emperor John Ho!