In Memoriam: Dr Veronica Lam in Academia

It is with great sorrow that we gather to remember our dear colleague Veronica, lost in the South East Asian Tsunami in December 2004.

Veronica Lam studied at UCL from 1966-1972 where obtained both her BSc and PhD degrees in Biochemistry. Her PhD research was on bacterial cell wall components under the supervision of Dr P M Meadow. Soon after graduating she joined the Department of Biochemistry, University of Hong Kong, as a Demonstrator in 1973. Veronica spent all of her working life at the University of Hong Kong, where she served the university as a loyal, dedicated and valued member of the Department of Biochemistry for almost 32 years.

Her career progressed over the years from demonstrator to Assistant Lecturer to Lecturer and Senior Lecturer. In 1998 she received a 25 years long service award from the University. This year she would have completed 30 years as an academic staff.

When she joined the university, HKU was mainly a teaching university and there was virtually no money for research in Hong Kong. So she concentrated on teaching in her initial years.

With the emergence of limited research funding in Hong Kong, in 1983 together with long-time collaborator, Dr Joseph Tam, they embarked on gaining expertise in the then rapidly advancing area of research in molecular genetics. Together they also promoted the field in Hong Kong by organizing the first international course on molecular biology techniques. Top molecular biologists from the USA came to teach and the course, which was attended by researchers from all over the region, was a great success.

Later in the 1980s there was more money for research and she developed a real passion for human genetics and turned to work on thalassaemia – a common inherited blood disease. More recently in the 1990s, she also branched out to work on another important genetic disease in the region – deficiency in glucose 6 phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) focusing on working out how the mutations affected the function of G6PD. G6PD deficiency, commonly known as favism affects about 5% of the Hong Kong males and 400 million worldwide. The disease is an important cause of neonatal jaundice. G6PD deficient individuals are at risk for haemolytic anaemia, triggered by infection, ingestion of some foods, ie fava beans or drugs including anti-malarials and some Chinese herbal medicines. In Hong Kong and many Asian countries, neonates are screened for G6PD deficiency and those at risk are counseled.
Together with Dr Margaret Adams of Oxford University, she and her student, Shannon Au, determined the first 3D structure of human G6PD, that of the variant G6PD Canton. Collaborating with Professor Paul Engel of Dublin University, she continued to provide important insights into the underlying cause of the enzyme deficiency in individuals with this mutation. She was also conscious of the need to translate her research and obtained a grant from the Hong Kong Innovation and Technology Fund to develop DNA-based methods for the diagnosis of G6PD deficiency for neonatal screening in hospitals.

Veronica was a dedicated teacher, with a real passion for human and molecular genetics. Indeed she ran the Human Genetics course for medical students until the curriculum changed to PBL mode in 1997. In the new MBBS curriculum she served as the department’s discipline coordinator for MBBS teaching and continued to teach genetics through the various media of lectures and practical workshops. She had a keen drive to educate the next generation of biochemists in the relevance of molecular genetics, developing and teaching the Molecular Medicine course in the BSc Biochemistry degree programme.

To her postgraduate students she was a tremendous mentor. All of them have done well after graduation – for example one went on to start a very successful biotech and equipment marketing company in Hong Kong, another is now an assistant professor in the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

In the scientific community she keenly promoted genetics, and played an important role in the Hong Kong Society of Medical Genetics activities over the years. She was a former Chairwoman of the Society and established the Society’s prize in Human Genetics for the best medical student in the subject.

To her colleagues she was always supportive, especially to junior members of staff, mentoring them in the development of their teaching skills. On a personal side, Veronica as a fellow Malaysian showed myself much kindness and sympathy when I first joined the department more than 20 years ago as a green “foreigner” in Hong Kong. Together we laughed at the many faux pas made due to my funny Cantonese. Over the years she lent much moral support and wise counsel to myself in my capacity as head of department.

All of us in the department and the students are so devastated that she is lost and we miss her very much. But we should take comfort in the following passages:
Psalm 139

If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night,"
Even the darkness is not dark to You,
And the night is as bright as the day

Psalm 23

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
... and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever

We will always remember Veronica: colleague, teacher, mentor and friend.

Professor Kathy Cheah

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