

ON THE CONFERMENT OF HONORARY FELLOWSHIP OF  
THE HONG KONG COLLEGE OF ANAESTHESIOLOGISTS  
At the 25<sup>th</sup> Congregation of the College

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Mr President, Colleagues, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Those of you who have been in Hong Kong more than three or four years ago would have met Dr. Zoltan Lett in person at meetings and functions of the anaesthetic and medical fraternity. It is no exaggeration that Dr. Lett has been an icon in the Hong Kong anaesthetic and medical scene. He is known as Lefty to many of his friends.

Dr Lett completed medical training at the University College Hospital in London and served in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War with decorations. He then settled to civilian anaesthetic practice - little did he know that he was soon to spend the rest of his clinical career outside the U.K. In 1954, he was recommended to and successfully recruited by Dr K.C. Yeo, the then Director of the **Hong Kong Government Medical & Health Department**, in conjunction with the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and the Professor of Surgery at the University of Hong Kong, Prof Gordon King and Prof Frank Stock respectively. He was appointed the first ever government specialist anaesthetist in Hong Kong. His main remit was to establish and develop the anaesthetic services of the government hospitals (at the time consisting of Queen Mary Hospital, Tsan Yuk Hospital and Kowloon Hospital), and to teach in the Medical Faculty of the University of Hong Kong.

Soon after arriving in Hong Kong, he, with a number of anaesthetists who were already practising in Hong Kong, founded the **Society of Anaesthetists of Hong Kong (SAHK)**. The founding members of the Society included Dr. George Thomas, and Dr. H.P.L. Ozorio after whom the Ozorio Connector for endotracheal tubes was named. By setting up the Society, the opportunities for the sharing of experience and knowledge amongst Hong Kong anaesthetists were enhanced, and improvement in clinical standards was encouraged. Dr Lett retired from the Society Council in 1983 after having served in various capacities for 29 years, including being President for 17 of those years. During this time, he put Hong Kong anaesthesia on the world map. Lefty would make sure that any notable anaesthetist from around the world cannot escape from giving a talk to the Society to pay for his or her privilege to visit Hong Kong. As a Hong Kong anaesthetist attending overseas conferences or meetings, you are more likely than not to be asked if you know Lefty Lett!

The **Hong Kong College of Anaesthesiologists (HKCA)** has much to thank Dr Lett for. The idea of a College for anaesthesia in Hong Kong first came to the Council of the Society of Anaesthetists and Dr. Lett was a staunch supporter in the project from the very beginning, and became a subscriber to the formation of the College and a member of its first Council.

Intensive Care Medicine is well developed in Hong Kong today. Every major hospital has an Intensive Care Unit, and our College grants Fellowships by examination in this specialty. It is to the credit of Dr Lett too that we have the **Hong Kong Society of Critical Care Medicine (HKSCCM)**. He saw the need for such a professional organization after attending the Inaugural Congress of the Western

Pacific Association of Critical Care Medicine (WPACCM) in Kyoto, Japan in 1982. WPACCM is a regional association of national bodies in Critical Care Medicine in the Western Pacific Region including countries from Korea to Australasia. Dr Lett lobbied for the founding of the HKSCCM and it came into being within the year, with him as its Founding Chairman. This Society still serves the critical care community in Hong Kong today.

Meanwhile, in his capacity as the lead clinician in our specialty in the Hong Kong Government, Dr Lett was able to gradually strengthen staffing levels and build up the anaesthetic services in the **Government hospitals** during his tenure. During this period, he oversaw the opening of Queen Elizabeth Hospital in 1962 and Princess Margaret Hospital in 1976. Although he was in charge of a centralized anaesthetic service in all the Government hospitals - which is no longer the case today - his influence was felt in **non-Government hospitals** as well. He freely provided support, advice and help to the anaesthetic services in other hospitals in Hong Kong. The development of anaesthetic services throughout Hong Kong was catalysed by relationships that were born of the Society of Anaesthetists of Hong Kong, of which Dr Lett was instrumental. This predates the present co-ordination by the Hospital Authority by decades.

As we heard earlier, Prof Stock of the **University of Hong Kong** was one of those who enticed Lefty to come to Hong Kong. He ensured that one of the roles of the appointed Specialist Anaesthetist was to teach undergraduates in the then only medical school in Hong Kong. Dr. Lett was appointed Part-time Lecturer in charge of the undergraduate teaching of anaesthesia in the Department of Surgery on arriving in Hong Kong in 1954, a post which he held until he retired from the Government in 1977. Lefty recognized that an independent department of anaesthetics at HKU was important and convinced the University to commission Prof. Michael Vickers of Cardiff, U.K. (an Honorary Fellow of our College) to write a report (the Vickers Report) which became the basis for the eventual formation of an independent *Department of Anaesthesia* in the University of Hong Kong.

Dr Lett recognized early on that to enhance the standard of care, the proper training of anaesthetists was paramount. Although anaesthetists came through the system by obtaining Fellowship from the English or Irish Faculties after a period of clinical attachment in those countries, such opportunities were limited and competitive. He set to work to enhance the **training opportunities of local anaesthetists**. Persistent lobbying of the Medical & Health Department and the English and Australasian Faculties of Anaesthetists (FARCS and FARACS) resulted in the first Primary Fellowship examinations of the FARACS being held in Hong Kong, funded partly by the HK Government. Thus began the long and fruitful association between the Australasian and the Hong Kong anaesthetic fraternity. Much changes needed to be made to the training for junior anaesthetists to satisfy the training requirements of the FARACS programme. I was the first trainee to undergo the revamped full training programme of the FARACS in the early 1970's, and I well remember Dr. Lett trying to seek non-anaesthetic placements for me. Today, rotational training is a *de rigueur* part of the training programme under the HKCA and the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine. Preparation or Revision Courses for Fellowship examinations were also set up by Dr. Lett, who engineered the first courses with local tutors and Australian visitors. These are now well established and taken for granted.

By the time Dr Lett retired from serving the Hong Kong Government, both the Society of Anaesthetists of Hong Kong and the Government Anaesthetic Service were well established and the structured training programme for anaesthetists was maturing. He could be justly proud of his achievements and enjoy his retirement. But he did not stop there. He joined the Department of Surgery at the University of Hong Kong and served as Lecturer, then Reader, in Anaesthetics and as a Research Associate, continuing his teaching of undergraduates and postgraduates until the Department of Anaesthesia was established. When he then retired a second time, from the University in 1983, it was no surprise that his experience was recognized as he was promptly recruited by the Caritas Medical Centre to head their Anaesthetic Department, which he served until 1993 with distinction and affection. After that, he continued with part-time clinical work, filling gaps in clinical service needs in hospitals until 1996 when he ceased to practise altogether. He then started his travelling days, spending time between Hong Kong, the U.K., the U.S.A. and Germany, keeping an interest in the specialty and maintaining friendships until he could no longer travel, eventually settling in the U.K.

Lefty was not only an administrator, clinician, and teacher, he was also a **mentor and friend** to many anaesthetists - a mentor that many anaesthetists who trained in Hong Kong warm to. He was also an **author** with several books to his name - notably a textbook in anaesthetics<sup>1</sup> and two about the history of anaesthesia & intensive care in Hong Kong<sup>2</sup>. He encouraged clinical research and published in peer reviewed journals.

Dr Lett's contribution to our specialty was recognized not only locally, but also by various international bodies. He received an emeritus Professorship from the **University of the Philippines**; the Honorary Life Membership of the **Philippine Society of Anesthesiology**; Honorary Life Membership of the **Society of Anaesthetists of Hong Kong**; the Pask Certificate of Honour from the **Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland** (1978) for outstanding contribution to anaesthesia; Honorary Fellowship of the **British Medical Association** (1979); and Fellowships from medical Colleges around the world including the **Royal College of Anaesthetists**, the **Australia and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists** and the **International College of Surgeons**.

Dr Lett was the lynch pin in bringing Hong Kong anaesthesia from a primitive state after the Second World War to the sophisticated system with a high standard of clinical care that we have today. He involved himself not only in clinical anaesthetic services but also in the development of the specialty and related fields. He served Hong Kong for over 40 years in the specialty he dedicated himself to, and he served it well. We have to thank him for his career-long contribution to Hong Kong anaesthesia and by extension Hong Kong healthcare.

Mr President, Colleagues, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen, I commend Dr Zoltan Lett to the highest honour that our College can bestow, Honorary Fellowship of the College.

**Dr Ronald Lo**  
Past President, The Hong Kong College of Anaesthesiologists

#### REFERENCES

- 1 "Anaesthesia", Z. Lett, HK University Press, 1983
- 2 "History of Anaesthesia in Hong Kong", Z. Lett, Centre for Asian Studies, HKU, 1987  
"ANAESTHESIA & INTENSIVE CARE IN HONG KONG - EVOLUTION & PRESENT POSITION", Z. LETT & R. LO, CENTRE FOR ASIAN STUDIES, HKU, 1997.