

Professor Tak Hong Lee CBE, MD, ScD, FRCP, FRCPath, FMedSci, FKCP

Obituary by Christopher LAI, DM, FRCP, FHKAM(Medicine), FHKCP, Honorary Clinical Professor, Department of Medicine & Therapeutics, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

I will remember Tak as the ultimate fighter. While many would throw in the towel when facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles, Tak would plot meticulously with a cool head and fight with every fibre to achieve his goals. Tak's perseverance has served to advance Allergy as a medical and scientific specialty in Hong Kong, the UK and worldwide.



I witnessed the fighter in Tak when he asked me to advise on the respiratory side of his newly diagnosed systemic sclerosis several weeks ago. Despite the multitude and complexity of his various health issues, he already had formulated a clear and detailed plan on what would be required for this battle, after all, he had overcome serious illness from cancer three decades earlier whilst establishing himself as one of the pioneering leaders in his specialty in the UK and subsequently in Hong Kong. Emblematic of his meticulous nature and his thoughtful leadership, he had efficiently assembled a team of relevant specialists to advise him on his complicated medical conditions, and led each of us to work harmoniously towards the same goal.



I have known Tak since my days in the UK almost 4 decades ago. I was privileged to see him lecture at scientific meetings at that time, where he showed an impressive way of generating and effectively communicating innovative ideas. As a Hong Konger and world-renowned medical leader, he was greatly admired by us and regularly invited to speak at our respiratory and allergy meetings, even before he returned here in 2011.



One would be forgiven to assume after he retired from the UK at the pinnacle of his profession, he would put his feet up and simply enjoy the vibrant life in Hong Kong, especially in view of his long term health issues (which amazingly seemed not to impede his energy, enthusiasm and productivity). Not Tak, though, as his ongoing dedication to develop his beloved medical specialty, selfless desire to better colleagues and serve patients has led to long-lasting benefits for patients and communities in Hong Kong and worldwide. Tak's legacy within the medical profession in Hong Kong is an inspiration to myself and many others, which was motivated entirely for the betterment of others rather than for personal gain.



One of Tak's top missions was to establish Allergy as a specialty in Hong Kong, as he and his able contemporaries had in the UK. People here may not know that he actually started off as a respiratory physician but because of his strong research interest in asthma, he later became an allergist in the UK. Because of his then-existing specialist registration in Respiratory Medicine, achieving his goal of developing Allergy as a deservedly respectable specialty in Hong Kong presented some bureaucratic challenges. He first would need to additionally obtain a specialist title in Allergy, to enable him the platform from which to train young doctors within the specialty. It is a testament to Tak's professionalism and resilience



that despite being one of the world's most prominent allergists that he dutifully took on the challenges of this task, securing the title of Specialist in Allergy after more than a year of cutting through red tape. This remarkable foresight from Tak subsequently allowed him to become the most influential leader in Allergy in Hong Kong.



Tak's next move was to gather people interested in the discipline to work together, in spite of the multitude of diverging opinions on how best to approach developing a largely overlooked specialty. To identify the 'right' people, Tak invited each of us, one at a time, usually at a bar over a glass (or quite often more) of beer – his favourite drink – to explore our views and how we could contribute. The beer might have been a catalyst to bring out candid views or at least, it made the meeting more enjoyable in case there were some conflicting ideas. Through this exercise, he built a team that could work smoothly together toward the same goal. The rest is history, and he miraculously transformed the Hong Kong Institute of Allergy into an academically-oriented organization that not only held regular educational courses and meetings, but also encouraged research by funding worthwhile scientific projects in allergy. He also mentored Hong Kong's first ever locally trained allergist in adult medicine who is currently our only full-time academic staff in this discipline.



Tak knew it would take a lot more than his impressive achievements over the last 10 years to truly and firmly establish Allergy as a recognized specialty here. He knew he would need the support from the government to establish funded posts for trained specialists in Hong Kong, who in turn could contribute to the care of hundreds-of-thousand patients with disruptive and potentially life-threatening allergies. Through his leadership, an Allergy Alliance has been formed with health professionals of related specialties and lay persons who are stake holders in Allergy. Remarkably, Tak was able to convene a meeting for the Alliance just a couple of days before his death, promptly distributing minutes on the following day outlining various planned activities that would further his noble ambitions.



Tak was more than a hard-working professional. He enjoyed his golf and I was fortunate enough to share his joy at all the courses here. His ability to strategise and innovate shots were particular strengths in his game, in keeping with his ambition and problem solving ability he would exhibit professionally, although like many of us, his shot execution on the course might not always match his brilliant ideas. That did not worry Tak a bit. Unlike those who would moan after a bad shot, this gentleman would smile and could always see the funny side of the game.



I will always remember Tak as a noble person and a great leader who would never give up and fight gallantly for the right cause. When I asked him how his long-term disabling health issues had impacted him, he smiled and calmly said they actually made him a better person. No grudges, just forever so positive and graceful for whatever life threw at him, that's your Tak. Although he is no longer with us, his spirit and the 'Tak's way of problem-solving' will always be in our thoughts. May he rest in peace.