

NUS honours 104-year-old pioneer gynaecologist

Oon Chiew Seng also made contributions in women's health, anti-ageing science, dementia

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Dr Oon Chiew Seng, one of Singapore's first obstetricians and gynaecologists, has received an honorary degree from the National University of Singapore (NUS) for her lifelong dedication to medical education and public service.

Dr Oon also set up Singapore's first dementia home.

Yesterday, the 104-year-old was presented with the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters by President Halimah Yacob, who is also the NUS chancellor.

The ceremony was held at the University Cultural Centre at NUS Kent Ridge Campus.

NUS said that the honour was in recognition of Dr Oon's accomplishments as one of Singapore's pioneer obstetrics and gynaecology practitioners, as well as for her contributions in women's health, anti-ageing science and dementia.

Dr Oon, the youngest of 10 children, was born in Penang in 1916. She was a nurse in the 1930s. She then studied to become a doctor at King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore, a predecessor institution of NUS. She graduated in 1948.

During World War II, she continued her studies in India, where she lived in a flat shared by four families with 16 children.

Yesterday, Dr Oon got up from her seat with some help but stood on her own to receive the degree. Her nephew, Dr Oon Chong Hau, delivered her speech on her behalf.

In her speech, Dr Oon, who never married, said she was delighted to receive this distinction from NUS in recognition of her life's work and her 75 years of contribution to society and nation-building.

Quoting 19th-century British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, she said there is no education like adversity, and addressing the class of 2020 told them this was the best time to graduate.

Dr Oon also shared personal stories to encourage new graduates to persevere in their journey through "grit, resilience, integrity and purpose".

These are the very same qualities that made her a gutsy trailblazer.

"Whenever you are in a panic mode, remember, get a grip of yourself," she said.

Dr Oon was one of the first women in the region to qualify as a member of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (O&G) in 1955. She was also the first O&G specialist to start her own private practice in 1959 after leaving the then Kandang Kerbau Hospital.

She retired in 1991 at the age of 75 and travelled extensively. But travel and mahjong could not fill all her time, she said. Dr Oon, who drove herself till she was 91, said in



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DR OON CHIEW SENG, one of Singapore's first obstetricians and gynaecologists, in a previous interview.

her favourite brain exercise.

After retiring, she worked on setting up the Apex Harmony Lodge for dementia patients in Pasir Ris and made trips to Australia to learn how dementia homes were run.

Singapore's first dementia home opened its doors in 1999, with Dr Oon serving as its chairman till 2012.

Professor Chong Yap Seng, the dean of NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, said at the ceremony that Dr Oon was heavily involved in getting funding for the establishment of the dementia home and that she pioneered a new care concept for Alzheimer's patients in Singapore after studying eldercare homes around the world.

He added that she had volunteered her time at a home for the aged sick and "made service to the community her life's theme".

Among the numerous accolades Dr Oon has received for her clinical and humanitarian work are the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Ministry of Health in 2011 and the Public Service Star in 2013.

In his speech, NUS president Tan Eng Chye said: "She is an inspiration and a role model not only for her dedicated community service, but also for her refreshingly zestful approach to living a full, rich and engaged life."

Dr Oon herself said in a previous interview: "People have asked me whether I have arrived and am satisfied with my achievements. I asked them: Arrive where? Life is not a race. To me, there is no finishing line. It is a journey which I will complete in my own time and at my own pace."

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Dr Oon Chiew Seng being accompanied by Adjunct Associate Professor Helen Chen (left) and her caregiver as she was leaving the University Cultural Centre, where she received the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters yesterday.
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