

Fun in pharmacy

For Mrs Chan Ching Oi, the first head of SGH's Pharmacy Department, the constant changes in her working life offered fun and the chance to learn new things

●●● BY SUKI LOR

WHEN THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH (MOH) closed its pharmaceutical manufacturing arm in the 1980s, Mrs Chan Ching Oi, who had begun her 28-year career with the ministry as head of the unit, felt the change keenly.

Located on the SGH Campus off Jalan Bukit Merah, the unit made generic drugs such as painkillers and antibiotics for government outpatient clinics and hospitals.

When the facilities became outdated, overseas consultants were engaged to look into a revamp. After they put the cost at \$30 million, the ministry decided it would be better to close the unit and buy all the drugs it needed instead.

"It was a heartache. I loved all those machines and equipment. We had tablet machines, mixture machines, injection machines... all kinds of machines," Mrs Chan said wistfully about the unit's closure.

By then, she had already transferred to Singapore General Hospital (SGH) as Head of the hospital's Pharmacy Department – a post she held until she retired in 1993, aged 55.

After a decade with MOH's manufacturing unit, where challenges included replacing a diesel-fired boiler with one that ran on more environmentally-friendly gas, Mrs Chan spent the next 10 years as the head of its pharmaceutical services' purchasing unit. She was given an annual budget of as much as \$36 million to procure drugs for the ministry, as well as raw materials for its manufacturing arm.

SGH was her third and final MOH post-

ing. She considers herself "very lucky" to have worked the whole spectrum of the industry, from the back end to the front line of health care services.

She not only took all the challenges she faced in stride, but also enjoyed them. "I loved it thoroughly," she said of her long career with the MOH. "When I was at SGH, very important major changes happened and I also benefited from that."

One was the computerisation of the costing and labelling of medicine, which replaced the labour-intensive task of writing the number of times a day a patient was to take his medication, and its price. Much work went into the task, including meetings with vendors to select one through a tender process.

Computerisation was a boon, and resulted in greater accuracy in drug dispensing and reduced waiting

time for patients, Mrs Chan said.

Another momentous change that she regarded as the best thing to have happened during her stint with SGH was the restructuring and subsequent corporatisation of the then government hospital.



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MRS CHAN CHING OI, FORMER HEAD, PHARMACY DEPARTMENT, SGH, AND CURRENT CEO, ISS EDUCATION GROUP, ON THE CLOSING IN THE 1980S OF THE MOH'S DRUG MANUFACTURING FACILITY



PHOTO: JASPER YU

"It was a big thing for me. There was a team of five American consultants helping SGH with the restructuring. I learnt a lot from the change. They taught us everything – the A to Z of running a hospital," she said, adding that the consultants trained not just the heads of departments but also the rank and file, and established a business model and processes.



Mrs Chan Ching Oi was the first head of the SGH's Pharmacy Department – a post she held until she retired in 1993, aged 55.

It was during her watch that the Pharmacy Department launched inpatient pharmacy services.

"We set up a little lab in the oncology department to specially dilute and prepare (chemotherapy) doses for oncology patients. Sometimes, doctors had to change the dose on the spot, depending on the patient's condition. That's one of the units we started during my time," said Mrs Chan.

All in, she is grateful for the opportunities to learn so much over the years.

Her broad management experience came in handy when, six months into her retirement, she became Chief Operating Officer at ISS Education Group, which manages ISS International School (Singapore).

She had found herself with too much time on her hands and offered to help her husband, who co-owns ISS, manage the education business.

Now the chief executive officer of the group, the youthful and energetic septuagenarian shows no signs of slowing down.

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