Mentor to Singapore doctors dies

BY JUDITH TAN

GENERATIONS of medical doctors knew “Prof Kana”, who died last Saturday at age 90, as a consummate teacher of human anatomy.

Back when computer graphics and videos were not available as standard teaching tools, the affable anatomy professor gave his white doctor’s coat a starring role in class.

He would take it off and twist it so it looked a bit like the folds of a human stomach to give his students an idea of the appearance of stomach tissue, recalls a former student.

That student, Mr Yong Eu Leong, is now a professor heading the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the National University Hospital.

The guru’s full name, Ragurathah Kanagasuntheram, may not have tripped off every student’s tongue easily, but he made sure, through his passion for the subject, that they found their way through the mandatory course.

He died in the Australian city of Adelaide, where he had lived with his family since 2000.

Bones, muscles and organs make for a rather dry subject, but Prof Kana made it pulse with his quick wit, which many of those taught by him will also miss.

Former student, colorectal surgeon Francis Seow-Choen, recalls that a student once mistook a woman’s fallopian tubes for the vas deferens, the ducts carrying sperm in men. Prof Kana responded, without missing a beat: “Vast difference.”

Prof Kana endeared himself to his students by helping them with his “special tutorials” held just before the professional examinations.

His humour and zest for life aside, his research on the human stomach put him among the contributors to Gray’s Anatomy, until today widely regarded as a classic textbook on the subject and used in medical schools worldwide.

Prof Kana, who came from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), became a medical doctor in 1944, and obtained his doctorate in anatomy from the University of Cambridge in 1952.

He headed the Department of Anatomy in the medical faculty at the then-University of Singapore from 1963 to 1980, when he retired. When the university became the National University of Singapore in 1981, he became its first Emeritus Professor, one of the highest honours conferred by the institution.

Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan, an ophthalmologist who headed the Singapore National Eye Centre and later the Singapore General Hospital before he entered politics, named Prof Kana as his first and favourite professor in medical school in 1980.

Dr Balakrishnan said: “His love of teaching, complete mastery of the subject and abiding concern for his students were legendary. All of us who were blessed by his life and example will always treasure his memory.”

Prof Kana leaves behind his wife, five children and nine grandchildren.