

Father of medical home: Dr. Sia remembered as ‘quintessential advocate’

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Calvin C.J. Sia, M.D., FAAP, father of the medical home concept of care and Emergency Medical Services for Children Program, died Aug. 19 in Honolulu at age 93.

It was Dr. Sia who said, “Every child and youth deserves a medical home.”

The medical home concept is well-known and embraced by all pediatricians, but not everyone is aware of its beginnings, said Fan Tait, M.D., FAAP, AAP chief medical officer/senior vice president.

“He was one of the greats in pediatrics,” Dr. Tait said. “If not for Dr. Sia and his leadership, we would not have family-centered care within the medical home. He helped develop the medical home concept in collaboration with Family Voices, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau and the AAP.”

In 1958, Dr. Sia opened a pediatric practice in Honolulu. As a community pediatrician, Dr. Sia valued the insight of colleagues at schools, social services and other groups.

Just as he did with the medical home concept, he often set out to solve challenges within his community, then brought those solutions to the state, national and sometimes global level. His advocacy spanned the scope of pediatrics, including children with disabilities, emergency services for children, child abuse prevention and early periodic screening, diagnosis and treatment standards.

“You couldn’t end up sitting next to him in any kind of event that he didn’t just win you over and convince you about the medical home,” said AAP Past President Judith S. Palfrey, M.D., FAAP (2009-’10). Dr. Palfrey worked with Dr. Sia on community pediatrics initiatives, including on the advisory committee for the Annie E. Dyson Foundation’s initiative for pediatric residency training in community pediatrics.

Early in his career, Dr. Sia developed a home visiting program to prevent child abuse and neglect among children with special health care needs. After introducing the Hawaii Healthy Start Home Visitors Program, he brought the model to the nation as Healthy Families America.

While he was president of the Hawaii Medical Association (1976-’77), Dr. Sia worked on expanding the quality of emergency care provided to children with injuries, where responders were not equipped for children. He urged the AAP to support a system of emergency medical care for children. The resulting Emergency Medical Services for Children (EMS) Act was enacted in 1984.

“You kind of dig into anything that’s really, really good in pediatrics and Cal was somewhere working on it and often leading it,” Dr. Palfrey said. “He just never stopped being the quintessential advocate.”

Passionate and persistent in his leadership and mentorship, Dr. Sia was “a willing resource” who always put other people first, Dr. Tait said.

This trait served the AAP well when Dr. Sia helped bring the AAP and American Medical Association (AMA) together to advance child health issues.



“He was a tremendous champion for children who cared about all kids. The breadth of his work reflects that. Some people have ideas. He took them and got them implemented,” said California state Sen. Richard J. Pan, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, a past AAP delegate to the AMA House and past member of the AMA Section Council on Pediatrics, both chaired by Dr. Sia.

In 2007, the AAP, American Academy of Family Physicians, American College of Physicians and the American Osteopathic Association adopted the Joint Principles of the Patient-Centered Medical Home, setting a standard definition of the medical home.

Dr. Sia chaired the National Center for Medical Home Implementation Project Advisory Committee.

Throughout his career, he received numerous honors, including the Barbara Starfield Primary Care Leadership Award from the Patient-Centered Primary Care Collaborative (2015), Clifford G. Grulee Award (2001), Job Lewis Smith Award in Community Pediatrics (2001), AMA Benjamin Rush Award (1998), the first Emergency Medical Service for Children National Heroes Lifetime Achievement Award (1998) and the AMA/AAP Abraham Jacobi Award (1992). In 2005, the AAP Council on Community Pediatrics established the Calvin C.J. Sia Community Pediatrics Medical Home Leadership and Advocacy Award.

He was a member of the AAP Sections on Community Pediatrics, International Child Health and Emergency Medicine.

Dr. Sia was born in China, and at age 12 moved with his family to Hawaii. The son of a physician father and musician mother, his maternal grandparents were the first Chinese physicians in Hawaii. He earned his M.D. from Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine in 1955, was a lieutenant in the U.S. Army Medical Corps at William Beaumont Army Hospital and completed his pediatric residency at Kapiolani Children’s Hospital in Honolulu.

Dr. Sia’s wife, Katherine Wai Kwan Li, died Oct. 19, 2019. Dr. and Mrs. Sia are survived by three sons, including Michael Hung Tai Sia, M.D., FAAP, of Honolulu, their wives, six grandchildren and one great-grandchild.