

What Lies Beneath

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member

- b) Giving her a contact for sound marital counselling if she can convince Dan to salvage the marriage.
- c) Advising her the roles and limitations of a family lawyer in order to protect her and her four children's needs.
- d) Asking her to consider soliciting the support of one or two trusted girlfriends whom she can lean on through this crisis.
- e) Assuring her that she is not alone in facing this kind of tribulation, and sharing with her some positive outcomes of friends and patients who had overcome marital assaults of this nature.
- f) Encouraging her to disclose her struggles to her immediate boss whom she trusts so that the boss can understand why she may not perform as well in this period.

In response to the question, "what do family doctors do?", FamilyDoctor.org wrote:

Family doctors take care of the physical, mental and emotional health of both their patients and their patients' families. They know your family's health history and how it can affect you. They are trained to care for you through all the stages of your life.

I have learned that human beings are highly complex creatures and that I need to be reminded of the broad definitions of my role as one who cares for my patients in the context of their families, as well as in the different stages of their lives. And to do that, I would have to always seek what lies beneath their physical symptoms. **SMA**



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Crystal's left-sided throbbing headache had all the classic features of a migraine. It was a "spot diagnosis", as we like to say. Treatment with NSAIDs or ergotamine would produce predictable relief, except that I sensed something was amiss since Crystal and her family have been consulting with me for a number of years. It was probably the lack of her usual eye contact or that her smile was unnatural. It might also have been the vague and circumventing manner of her speech. Whatever the cue was, I have learned over time that it always pays to ask if there is something more than the obvious diagnosis.

"How are you, really?" I asked after a deliberate pause of a few seconds of silence.

Her lips began to quiver as her eyes finally shifted to gaze into mine.

"Dan hasn't come home since three months ago! I don't know where he's gone and I don't know how to contact him."

The next 20 minutes were for me, the most painful and yet most satisfying as I offered a pair of ears to someone whose inner agony was finally able to erupt like an abscess "pointing"; releasing excruciating pain when it is filled and stretched with pus.

Crystal discovered her husband's adultery through accidentally looking into his emails. When he was confronted, he did not even bother to deny it. Crystal thought his face almost looked relieved – as if he was waiting anxiously to be caught.

The prescription I gave included:

- a) Sharing her burden with her immediate family – her parents and her sisters.