



Music Before Medicine, Songs before Surgery

By Dr Tan Lai Yong

Doctors are called to the high ideal of caring for a person to the point where he or she re-connects with his family and community. My day at the village was a live lesson in successful community health. This day, music came before medicine, dancing before debridement and singing before surgery.

In early Spring this year, my colleague Loh Cheng and I were happily running a training course for village doctors during a conference in a remote part of northwest Yunnan. We were enjoying the Spring blossoms, the freshly harvested garden peas at meal times, and of course the interaction with the village doctors who were the first line of healthcare providers in this rural community. Over dinner, we stumbled onto the news that there was a village festival some 10km from the little township clinic (a 20-bed hospital) that was hosting our rural health conference. The festival would begin before lunch tomorrow, and we decided to participate in the merriment.

Village festivals in Yunnan are always great to be part of, with colourful dances and vibrant ethnic music. The village was down a ravine, along an unpaved road and we also had to walk across a rickety suspension bridge. It was a leprosy village, or more accurately, an ex-leprosy village as once treated, the residents no longer carry the dreaded bacteria in their bodies. However, they still suffer the consequence of nerve damage and also carry the stigma of being “unclean”.

personally speaking



For years, these leprosy-affected folks lived in isolation in this remote place but today was a wonderful step in community acceptance. Choirs and dancing troupes from surrounding villages – most of them hiking 5 to 10 km – were coming into this village to celebrate with the residents.

Not too long ago, no one outside the leprosy village would even buy their chickens or farm produce. Then, people feared the “lepers”. But today, they were sitting in the same courtyard and having a meal together. The village people in and around this leprosy village all know seasoned local doctor, Dr Li Gui Ke, who had worked tirelessly over the past 20 years; not just treating the patients but getting scholarships for their children to go to universities far beyond the village. And the circle today was beautifully linked as many university students from the cities around had come as volunteers to organise this celebration – among them, children whom Dr Li helped to secure scholarships.

The sound of firecrackers echoed through the ravine and the sense of celebration reached us even before we descended to the riverside. The village was across a lovely river and we made our way across the somewhat flimsy suspension bridge, on which there were more gaps than wooden planks. Yellow fields of canola flowers formed a welcome spread on the other side.

It was a delight to stumble into this community celebration in the hills. I was only too happy to adjourn from the medical conference into a vibrant community event. It reminded me of the axiom that doctors should go beyond treating a disease, and even go beyond treating the individual who has a disease. Doctors are called to the high ideal of caring for a person to the point where he or she re-connects with his family and community. My day at the village was a live lesson in successful community health. This day, music came before medicine, dancing before debridement and singing before surgery.

The quiet Dr Li sat in the shade of a mud house, enjoying the concert, sipping a cup of green tea. It took him many years of hard work to get to this day.

As the festivities drew to a close, I said goodbye to Dr Li, and understood a bit more of the challenging rebuke that British writer G.K. Chesterton penned almost a hundred years ago – “Progress should mean that we are always changing the world to fit the vision, instead we are always changing the vision.” **SMA**



Dr Tan Lai Yong (MBBS 1985) left Singapore in 1996 to work in Yunnan, China, training village doctors and carrying out rural healthcare projects such as subsidised or free surgery. His work has also been featured on Channel NewsAsia, as part of a six-part "Asians of the Year" series. The video clip can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eS0GNXLyC5U>