

DR TAN CHI CHIU

is a Consultant Gastroenterologist and Physician at Gleneagles Medical Centre, as well as a Visiting Consultant to Tan Tock Seng Hospital. He is an elected member of the Singapore Medical Council, Chairman of its Medical Ethics Committee and Complaints Committees and a member of the Credentials Committee. Dr Tan has been deeply involved in the medical, youth development and community service scene in Singapore. He is a Board Member of the Lien Foundation-Singapore Management University Centre for Social Innovation and the National Youth Achievement Awards Council and Vice-Chairman of Make-A-Wish Foundation Singapore. He is a life member of the Singapore Red Cross Society and Adviser to the Raleigh Society Singapore. He is a Fellow of King Edward VII Hall where he was President as a student. He was previously Executive Director of the Singapore International Foundation and remains active in humanitarian and disaster relief work, leading recent medical relief missions to Sri Lanka after the Tsunami, and to Pakistan and Central Java after earthquakes. Dr Tan enjoys scuba diving, trekking, camping, horse-riding, travelling and exploration as well as wine appreciation, photography and cookery.



Dr Tan at one of his diving trips.

When I was a child, I wanted to be a ... Teacher, scientist, author, adventurer and many other things that piqued my interest as I grew up. I cannot say that I conscientiously wanted to be a doctor, although with the years, the idea grew on me.

My father's eldest brother was Chen Kok Kuang, who was one of the 11 medical students and members of the Medical College Union at Sepoy Lines who were killed by a Japanese mortar attack during the Japanese Occupation. This event is to this day remembered by a memorial plaque in NUS. When I first saw the plaque, I was astounded

that my late uncle looked just like my father at the same age. No doubt his sudden demise would have affected my father deeply. I often wondered if this was the basis of my dad's aspiration for all three of his children to study medicine. I became the first doctor in my generation of the family.

Growing up, the things I remember best about my brother and sister are ...

That they lived in worlds quite different from mine. My brother was six years younger and my sister, nine years younger. The age gap was so great that we really did not become close until much later in

life. I have always felt a bit protective towards my younger siblings, but I am sure they really did not need me watching out for them! They were both utterly capable. I am very different from both my siblings in temperament, interests and activities, which makes for good variety within the family.

The most influential people in my early life were ...

My parents. Dad was a hardworking career civil service mechanical engineer. He always wanted his children to become professionals so that we would be more independent and have a good quality of life. Mother was a domestic Science teacher. I acquired an interest in cooking from her and that is a pastime I still enjoy.

My best medical school memory is ...

Life in KE VII Hall in Sepoy Lines. That was a microcosm of society where we studied hard, played hard and lived with those who would become life-long friends, and for some, future spouses. To be frank, most of medical school, particularly the pre-clinical years, bored me to tears. I understand medical education is rather different today, but in those days, I found the lessons dry as dust. Meanwhile, I was enjoying life in KE Hall, getting involved in myriad activities and eventually becoming President of the Hall after a tough, but good-natured three-way electoral contest. I remain a member of the SCRC (Senior Common Room Committee) and a Fellow of KE VII Hall, which is now in Kent Ridge. It is now a vastly different Hall, where medical students are in the minority.

Although overseas electives are now commonplace, in our time, it was virtually unheard of. There was a brief period during which there was a Royal Free Hospital London and NUS medical exchange programme. Three of us were chosen, Tan Chorh Chuan, Joseph Thambiah and myself. We spent eight weeks in the UK, attending token ward rounds and tutorials, but really making best use of our time to explore the UK. This could have been deemed foolhardy in our final year, but the opportunity was too good to be missed. We came home a bit out of touch, but we passed, so it was all worth it.

I enjoy being a doctor because ...

The profession is a window to the world if it is engaged with an open mind. Through being a

doctor, I became involved with overseas youth community development projects with Operation Raleigh and joined the SAF, which taught me a lot about organisations and management, and trained me to lead humanitarian and disaster relief expeditions. Although being Executive Director of the Singapore International Foundation was not a medical job, my background stood me in good stead. Nowadays, apart from my private practice, I serve on non-profit boards and also work with fellow volunteers to run medical relief missions in major disasters such as the Tsunami and earthquakes in Pakistan and Yogyakarta. Medicine has given me all these opportunities and I am very thankful.

The most memorable thing I can remember as a practising doctor is ...

Being bullied and harassed to despair by a nursing sister who took perverse delight in making housemen miserable. The lady amongst us was regularly reduced to tears. The last straw was when we asked for some help and advice with an unfamiliar procedure and she declared that she would not help us, let us botch it and let the patient suffer so that we would be blamed for it! I wrote a note to the head of department requesting mediation, as we could not function in this atmosphere any longer. Unexpectedly, this note found its way to senior management and this sister was suspended pending investigation, not an outcome we had expected. But it did get her out of our way for several weeks. When she eventually returned, we thought she had had a brain transplant because she was an entirely different person, sweet as roses, demure, helpful and even made us toast during tea breaks, which we accepted at first with some trepidation in case it was poisoned!

One event almost made me want to quit clinical medicine. One night as a dog-tired houseman at 4 am, just as my head finally touched a pillow, my pager sounded. On the end of the line, a nurse said: "Dr Tan, Mrs Lim complains she can't sleep." In disbelief I cried: "That makes two of us!" I thought if this was the lot of a doctor, I will go do something else! Thankfully life seemed better by morning.

The best thing ever said to me ...

After a youth community service expedition in a small fishing village on an island off Batam, an elderly toothless village woman walked up to a well

that we had created, and drew a bucket of clean water. She came over to me and said in Bahasa: “Thank you for this. We have never had clean water before. I will never forget you all for what you have done.” It is not always about medical cures and heroic surgery. Sometimes merely giving what we take for granted to those who do not have it means more than anything.

I like to spend my Sunday mornings ...

Being woken by a ship’s bell at the crack of dawn, getting suited and tanked up, and plunging into the chilly depths of an exciting dive site. After a good physically demanding dive, to clamber back onboard ravenous and consume a good breakfast on deck in the morning sun. I enjoy scuba diving and do this as often as I can during the year. The most intense was in 2004 when I did 12 trips, in part to train to be a Divemaster. Singapore has access to some of the most excellent dive sites in the world within a four-hour flight radius. For my mental health I need to get out of the city frequently. The region is also very hot and humid and to me the best outdoor activity (other than for pure exercise, like running) is one that is conducted underwater! By this you can guess that I do not play any golf. But like golf, scuba diving is something one can do at almost any age.

A bad habit I would like to kick is ...

Eating too much! Then having to work really hard to get back in shape.

It is good to have a sibling in Medicine because ...

It is nice to be able to share experiences that we can relate to when we get together. We also have friends in common. We can help one another and our family members in case medical care is needed.

My greatest extravagance is ...

Travel, photography and diving. I have always loved to travel and see new places. I used to be an avid travel photographer and my photos even got published in a few magazines. Lately I have been taking more interest in underwater exploration and photography. Scuba diving is not a cheap recreational activity, considering the travel and all the equipment involved.

The book I am currently reading is ...

Marley & Me by John Grogan. This bestseller appeals



In a Muzaffarabad field hospital, Pakistan earthquake 2005.



With village children, Yogyakarta earthquake medical relief mission 2006.

to me as a dog lover. It is the funny, touching, heartwarming account of a *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist and his yellow Labrador. It illuminates life and relationships. With two mix-breed dogs of my own, I can empathise with the author trying to bring up a naughty puppy, train him with variable success to be a good dog, and love him as an integral part of the family.

My favourite author is ...

Joyce Meyer, a Christian writer steeped in the Word of God, who has a no-holds-barred way of expounding on some of the most profound issues of life and living, helping to guide people as they pilot lives that are complex and lacking in absolute reference points. She counsels without being judgmental, advises without being condescending, and above all exhibits and declares the love of God for mankind. Her books are full of truth and revelation.

The music playing in my car stereo is ...

The news jingle on BBC World Service! Driving is when I have the time to catch up with world news and current affairs, so my car radio is constantly tuned to FM 88.9. BBC produces the most balanced and most informative news and documentary programmes. Whenever there are news about Singapore and our region, I find their viewpoint objective, refreshing and somewhat different from the way it is reported in our local media.

My favourite singer is ...

Diana Krall. Hers is a laid back, unctuous, comfortable, relaxing and melodic brand of jazz. She is superb in concert, an expressive maestro on the piano, her voice oozing sex appeal. She is great to listen to in clinic in between patients.

The last movie I watched was ...

Transformers. I had huge reservations about joining friends for this, as it promised to be rather mindless. I was not mistaken. My circuits were definitely not overloaded by intellectual content! But the computer graphics were absolutely terrific. I am not an avid movie-goer. Admittedly

I enjoy some films, such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which brought to life childhood memories of the books I read. But to illustrate how seldom I watch movies, the annual Academy Awards is completely lost to me as I recognise so few of the movies and so few of the actors. It might as well be a fashion show.

My biggest food weakness is ...

Anything roasted or fried and meaty. When I was in Bhutan once, I was served a stew containing pieces of the most luscious pork fat. There was no lean whatsoever. On enquiring, my hosts said that in their culture, fat of the pork is the portion meant for royalty, the upper classes and honoured guests. The lean is only for the peasants!

I would like to be remembered as ...

Being mostly harmless! Seriously though: Someone who made the most of his opportunities, enjoyed life, stayed true to his beliefs and principles, had an open mind, was good to people, did what he could to make the world a slightly better place and above all else, loved, obeyed and fulfilled the will of God. ■