

By Dr Hsu Li Yang, Editorial Board Member

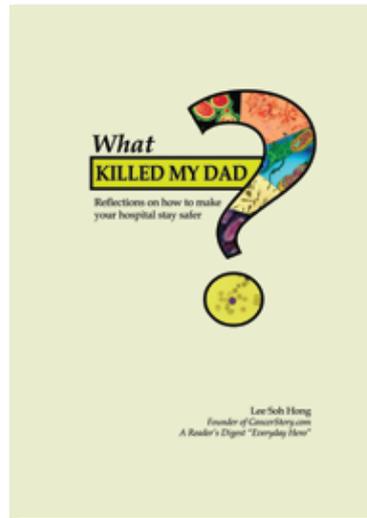
What Killed My Dad?

Reflections on how to make your hospital stay safer

By Ms Lee Soh Hong

This book was conceived and written in the couple of months when the author was coming to terms with the death of her father as a subsidised inpatient in a prominent Singapore hospital. In brief, the patient – who had a history of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease – presented with mild fever and abdominal pain, was rapidly provided two (ultimately wrong) diagnoses of escalating severity, had a cardiopulmonary arrest (its cause either unknown or poorly communicated to the family), recovered but developed a slew of nosocomial infections (including pneumonia, UTI, and *Clostridium difficile* colitis), and finally passed away after two further ICU admissions. While the author has been scrupulous about leaving out the names of the healthcare staff and hospital involved, the latter can be identified based on the details provided if one has worked (or is working) at that hospital. However, I believe that this is not deliberate.

The intention of the author is not merely to vent her grief and frustration with the hospital and our healthcare system. It is to provide a guide for future inpatients who have to navigate our complex public sector hospital system, as well as to provide thorough feedback to the Ministry of Health (MOH) and healthcare providers. Beyond a factual recapitulation of the final days of her father, the author has concisely defined the conditions and pathogens that afflicted him and highlighted several of the deficiencies that plague the public hospital system. For instance, she noted many infection control lapses (doctors not donning gowns and gloves before entering ICU rooms despite this being the standard protocol, healthcare staff not washing hands and so on), inadequate nurse-to-patient ratios in some wards, and the tendency to have multiple doctors managing a complex case with poor communication between the various teams, among others. Going by her description, the level of communication between several of her father's



More information about the book can be found at www.cancerstory.com

physicians and her family also seemed rather poor. In addition, she has also included relevant research findings from overseas as well as good suggestions on how things could possibly be improved.

At 139 pages with hand-drawn illustrations on practically every page, this book is a quick and easy read. Despite her traumatic experience, she has made every effort to provide a balanced and fair account, praising the healthcare staff who have been compassionate and/or attentive. Whereas factual inaccuracies do crop up (for example, stating that *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia* could not be destroyed with alcohol handrub), these are very rare considering that she is a layperson. A local doctor reading the account of her father's hospitalisation might form the initial impression that she belongs in the "FON" ("full of nonsense" – medical jargon for difficult patients/relatives) category. After all, she reported underperforming nurses to the senior nurse manager, wrote a letter to the hospital CEO, kept making requests to have different specialists see her father, and finally wrote this book. Her father's hospitalisation, while tragic, does not seem that unusual when one looks at the different things that have gone wrong individually.

But that would perhaps be the real tragedy from our perspective – many of us have become inured to the little (and sometimes not so little) things that can go wrong in the hospitals; we excuse ourselves by saying that these are the results of an undermanned and under-funded system while not making a real attempt to rectify things; we close an eye to apparently inept management by colleagues because we could one day inadvertently commit the same sins (and hope others will similarly close an eye); and we bleat about patients and relatives who highlight imperfections in our care because these "erode the sacred doctor-patient trust and relationship". Singapore's public healthcare system is indeed one of the best in the world, especially if

one considers the amount of financing it runs on. But it is neither above improvement nor criticism. This book is unique in that it is the first that has provided a frank, structured, albeit personal critique of our hospital system. All local patients and healthcare staff, especially medical and nursing students should read it. Unfortunately, as I write this review, there are only five copies left unpurchased (the author only printed fifty copies for sale). I hope that a second print run will be made.

One last word about the author: I have never met Ms Lee Soh Hong, but it is clear that she is a passionate woman with deep personal conviction. The death of her mother from colonic cancer in 1999 inspired her to found CancerStory.com – a website dedicated to helping cancer patients and their families deal with their disease. For her work on the website and as a cancer/patient advocate, she

has won numerous awards including the Readers Digest Inspiring Singaporean award in 2001. She was even lauded by our current Prime Minister for her work that same year. The death of her father has triggered her decision to stop her volunteer work, and write the account of his hospitalisation. From reading the book, I understand that there are still outstanding issues between the hospital and her family. For the sake of both, I hope that these will be resolved quickly and amicably.

Post script: In the time between the submission and publication of the review, the original 50 books have been sold out. A new edition incorporating corrections and added material is now available. I have also had the opportunity to meet the author, who has moved on from the grieving process, but feels that patient advocacy and safety remain top priorities in our healthcare system. She has yet to receive a formal reply from the hospital with regards to her father's death. ■