

By Dr Celeste Ann Chua

Gone too Soon ...

This is written in honour of Dr Ng Tsong Haur

A treasured friend.

An inspiration.

I am definitely not the most qualified person to be penning this, for I neither belong to the group of friends who knew “Ah Gong” the longest, nor the group of friends who were closest to him. But like many friends out there, I was shocked when he was diagnosed with terminal gastric cancer barely a few weeks ago. And on 25 July, he passed away.

When I first received confirmation of the diagnosis, I was stumped at what to do. Having left hospital practice for some time, I had been “out of orbit” for a while. Would it seem pretentious if I called him now after not having been in touch for so long? On the other hand, would it be unfeeling if I did not? Should I not express some form of concern as a friend? In the end I took the coward’s way out. I kept in touch with those who were closest to him.

I heard that he was not always keen on visitors, and wisely so, for he probably wanted to spend as much time as he could with his family and loved ones, reserving his energy for those he held dearest in his heart. That bit of news helped ease my guilt for my masterly inactivity, but I’m sure I was not the only “sideline friend” who wished I could have done more. However, I felt that the best thing I could do was to make time and space for him to be with his family.

Though we know in our heads how poor the prognosis of gastric cancer is, few, if any, will say they were prepared when Ah Gong slipped away that fateful Saturday night.

Why has Ah Gong’s passing affected me so? As a young mother, I can only say that if something similar had happened in my family, I would have come close to losing my mind.

I got to know Ah Gong when we did a posting together in Internal Medicine in 2004. That was my first posting after I got married, and it was one of the few that I chose to do out of “The Mothership”. I remember how we would go for the infamous bedside tutorials by a certain eminent neurologist, and whilst some were chewed up and spat out and others systematically demolished, Ah Gong would impress with his calm and steady manner. He knew what he was doing and he inspired confidence and trust.

As a colleague, Ah Gong was responsible and helpful. Although he was a senior MO by then (geriatric by most of our standards), he treated those around him with respect regardless of seniority. He was approachable, keen to teach and down to earth. He was cheerful and easy-going and when he talked in his “Ah Gong” way, things just seemed so simple.

He just had a way with people. With Ah Gong, you felt safe – safe to speak freely and not be put down, to ask stupid questions and have them taken seriously, to voice your difficulties and be treated fairly and with compassion. He did not have any airs. He did not throw tantrums. He was just a really good person. Ah Gong was an inspiration.

After those six months, I saw little of him. On and off, we bumped into each other in the hospitals but had little chance to catch up. We did meet recently in TTSH Kopitiam over an

opportunistic drink session among friends, but even then we did not speak much.

Then came the news a week or two later, that he had undergone an OGD for some epigastric discomfort and was diagnosed with terminal gastric cancer. If only I had taken a bit more time to connect with him over that drinks session, when I had my chance.

I guess Ah Gong’s death affects me because of who he was. He was a one-in-a-million kind of guy. How could he have been taken away, leaving the rest of us (lesser, nastier creatures) behind? Not to have him around is a loss to us all.

Again, I am not the most qualified to be penning this, but I do so for those friends like me who were not part of the inner circle and could only stand on the sidelines and keep him in our hearts and prayers.

In his daily work and through seemingly simple interactions, Ah Gong touched our lives and gave us a glimpse of the better people that we could be. He challenged us to try a little harder, to give a little more.

This is in honour of someone we did not have for long, but in the short time that we did, made a difference that will last many lifetimes. SMA



Dr Celeste Ann Chua is a family physician who is a full-time wife and mother and a tai-tai wannabe. She believes that our life experiences only serve to make us better doctors as we seek to cure sometimes, to relieve often and to comfort always.