

# If not for them...

By Dr Angel Lee

I remember the day as if it was yesterday. It was late one evening when I was returning home from school. My aunt's car was in the driveway. "That's odd, why would my aunt be visiting at this hour?" I thought to myself.

That day was my initiation into the world of palliative care.

Auntie and Mother were huddled around the dinner table. A hush enveloped the house, and through whispers and quiet exchange of words, I was told, "Father has cancer. It's advanced."

We had not seen it coming. Words could not adequately express the shock, the pain and the subsequent upheaval in our household that this news brought.

Father underwent treatment. Years later, I found out that it was called "palliative radiotherapy" and it was only meant to ease the pain. Months went by and Father began to ail. Even before home care services existed and were in vogue, a kind family friend, a "Dr Jaya", did home visits to check on Father. I remember he brought "Ensure" powder. He even taught Mother to tie a sarong around his waist so that he could sit upright better.

As Father grew more ill, he turned a deep yellow. His abdomen began to bloat and his legs swelled. Gradually, he could barely stay awake. Despite the help of my aunties, Mother found it challenging to cope with him physically, her own emotions and the three of us (children). Dr Jaya then arranged for him to be admitted and he died soon after in Tan Tock Seng Hospital. There were no hospices then

(and no foreign maids). Through it all, I remembered the kindness and care shown to my mother and me by the staff and Dr Jaya\*. It seemed like such a natural thing for them to do.

The funeral coincided with the "A" levels exams. I do not use it as an excuse for my less than exemplary results, but it was nevertheless a miracle that I got a place in medical school. Never mind that I may have been the beneficiary of the prevailing dogma of the day where top students were shunted to fields other than medicine. Maybe there was a higher purpose at work "conspiring" my entry into medicine.



▲ Taken in 2008: Dr Ong Wah Ying, Dr Wu Huei Yaw, current Head of Department of Palliative Medicine, Dr Angel Lee and Dr Koh Nien Yue (fifth, fourth, third and first from right). Dr Ian Leong and Dr Mervyn Koh are in the back row, on the left and right respectively.

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Even so, I would never have imagined that I would end up in palliative medicine. I never heard the term mentioned in the five years I was in medical school. Maybe I was too busy playing basketball.

I soon graduated. As an undergraduate, going to THE Singapore General Hospital seemed like a dream posting upon graduation. Instead, I was sent to Alexandra Hospital... and I loved every minute of it. How can one not be inspired by diagnosis of aortic dissection made through a simple observation of differential pulses... and by consultants who would review and personally do the lumbar puncture on sickly patients, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, as it simply should not wait till the more junior members of the on-call team finished fighting fires elsewhere?

This essence of care, again, seemed so natural for them.

medicine was also a fledging new discipline, and as an essential component of geriatric medicine training, all trainees had to have some training in end-of-life care. A/Prof Pang Weng Sun had just returned from HMDP and had spent some time in hospice work while in the UK. The plan for a hospital-based palliative care team was soon drawn and I was inducted into the hallowed halls of geriatric medicine, to support him in this work. In the Geriatrics Department, one could not have had better bosses and mentors.

“What did the patient think about the stent?”

I had just come up with a brilliant management plan for an elderly lady with obstructive jaundice. All the phone calls had been made and the necessary papers were all signed.

“Eh... she did not say ‘No’...” I muttered. Well, I did speak to her

**Under A/Prof Pang Weng Sun’s guidance and Prof Chee Yam Cheng’s manipulations, I left for the UK as the first local recipient of the HMDP fellowship in palliative medicine. From this humble beginning, grew the first hospital-based palliative care service in Singapore and a whole generation of doctors specifically trained in this field, who were, like me, first inspired by the heart and brilliance of the likes of those mentioned above.**

My mind was made up. It was going to be internal medicine for me and I wanted to be like them. I took up traineeship. I do not recall when it entered my consciousness, but it was probably around the time I was a trainee, that I began to notice the emerging hospice scene outside the hospital systems. Soon, that time in one’s career arrived.

With every release of the MRCP results, there would be the usual flurry of phone calls. Similar to many, I received many invitations. The sudden attention and the various “job” offers were rather flattering. But it was a crisp and succinct conversation that fired my imagination.

“So, you are interested in palliative care? Join me, I will arrange for you to be trained.” The year was 1993 and the proponent on the other end was Prof Chee Yam Cheng himself. Madness? If I had thought long and hard then, I might not have taken the same route. It was uncharted territory and I am not partial to adventure. Furthermore, I had not up till that point even done anything remotely akin to palliative care. Was it faith? I don’t dare presume. Most thought me foolhardy to have gone into a field of work so blindly. A few kind souls said it was foresight – but it was not mine!

So, I started doing the rounds of Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Prof Chee had allowed me to go on home visits with staff from the Hospice Care Association once a week. Dr Rosalie Shaw had arrived in Singapore not long before. Despite her handicaps in the local languages and dialects, she required no interpreters. Care and concern was transmitted without the need of a spoken language. I wondered what she thought of this greenhorn. I soon found out.

“Angel, this is an elderly Malay man. You don’t touch him that way.” I had been insensitive even as I tried to “help”. A lesson in cultural sensitivity learnt the hard way.

If not for another man, the story could well have ended there, for there were many moments of doubt. The stage was already being set and I was a cog fitting into the plan drawn by higher hands. Geriatric

family...

He guessed it. The patient did not turn up for the procedure and she died peacefully at home some weeks later. For whatever I did (or did not do), the family gave me a pair of crystal swans after she died. Each time I look at them, I am reminded that it should be the patient I care for and not the disease.

Before long, under A/Prof Pang Weng Sun’s guidance and Prof Chee Yam Cheng’s manipulations, I left for the UK as the first local recipient of the HMDP fellowship in palliative medicine. From this humble beginning, grew the first hospital-based palliative care service in Singapore and a whole generation of doctors specifically trained in this field, who were, like me, first inspired by the heart and brilliance of the likes of those mentioned above.

So I guess it was not so much of what motivated me, but probably more of who. If not for each of them who shaped my life, showed me how to and allowed me the latitude to make the mistakes that I made in the process of discovery, I would not be doing what I am doing today.

\*Dr F Jayaratnam, or Dr Jaya for short was heading the Medical Unit One in Tan Tock Seng Hospital, the forerunner of what would subsequently become the Geriatric Medicine Department. He had in those early days written an article on the use of opioids in patients with advanced cancer. Whenever MOs and Registrars mentioned his name, it was with awe and almost reverential fear. One ward sister even built on this reputation, saying “MOs had to iron the casesheets before his ward round!” **SMA**

*Dr Angel Lee and Mrs Lee Lay Beng (Medical Social Worker) were part of the first hospital-based Palliative Care Service in Singapore, which was set up by Dr Pang Weng Sun in 1996. She headed the service when Dr Pang left for Alexandra Hospital in 2001. Dr Lee is now Medical Director of Dover Park Hospice.*