



## Seeing differently: an ophthalmologist in Afghanistan

*Interview of Dr Nim-Chung Chan with student reporters*

*by: Michelle Tam and Wilfred Wong*

"It is hard to know what is 'gain' and 'loss' at a given timeframe." said Dr Nim-Chung Chan, an ophthalmologist who worked on a voluntary basis in Afghanistan for six years. In August 2010, ten medical aid workers were killed in the North-Eastern province of Badakhshan in Afghanistan. They were surgeons, optometrists, nurses as well as local guides and translators who had been travelling from the nearby Nuristan eye camp that was set up by the charity IAM (International Assistance Mission). All but one were found shot dead next to their abandoned vehicles. This incident seems to bear almost no connection to us, but to Dr Chan, it only echoed his everyday experience in Afghanistan.

The idea of serving the underprivileged overseas had been on his mind since his student days. Whilst at a Christian medical students' conference, he was deeply moved by the aid work that the other overseas students from poorer countries were doing. When IAM was actively looking for an ophthalmologist and an occupational therapist in 1993, the young couple jumped at the chance immediately.

Despite the on-going civil war in Afghanistan, Dr Chan and his wife arrived in Kabul and stayed until 1999, throughout the Taliban regime. They worked in the Noor Eye Hospital to see local patients, train doctors, as well as commute to the nearby eye camps. These eye camps

were set up for the local peasants, many of them unable to come to the capital. They were often located in remote mountainous regions. Many of these areas were dangerous as they were not officially controlled by any recognised governments.

Over the six years in this war-torn country, Dr Chan and his wife had been close to death several times. His wife once found a bullet in their pillow case, and on closer examination, discovered another bullet hole next to their bed. On another occasion, the local police suspected Dr Chan to be a spy and locked him up for the evening, only to miraculously let him go the next day. We might wonder how they learnt to cope with these daily death threats. On the contrary, Dr Chan considered it a great gain to endure such hardship in Afghanistan.

### Was the sacrifice really worth it?

"I don't think we need to think too much about the gain-loss side of things here. I felt that was the right thing for me to do, so I just went ahead with it." Indeed, Dr Chan's father became a Christian shortly after his return, and to him it had been the greatest gain that far outweighed all, if any, costs.

In 2005, Dr Chan became the Chief Executive of the Cedar Fund, a Christian relief and development

organisation. When the aforementioned Badakhshan massacre happened in 2010, he found out that his close friends, Tom Little and Dan Terry, were both killed. The team of ten were travelling from the Nuristan eye camp, which Dr Chan and his team helped set up many years ago. To date, the identity of the attackers is still a mystery.

We asked him whether there was any hint of anger, or even a sense of distrust towards the local people. After all, the massacre would hardly be a sign of appreciation towards those who had helped them on a voluntary basis for more than thirty years. Was he particularly angry over the killing as his friends were victims of the massacre?

“This incident has generated more publicity in the media because it happened to those with whom we’re more emotionally connected; but in fact, the locals must endure such unfortunate killings almost daily. Their lives are just as precious as ours, and I don’t think we deserve to be treated any differently, just because we are foreigners.” He said slowly, but firmly.

We wondered whether the foreign volunteers deserved to be treated better. The harsh conditions in Afghanistan would have put most willing volunteers off, and surely any physical help would be a strong enough indicator of genuine service. After all, they would not need to face such life-threatening dangers back in their home countries. He smiled at our thoughts, as he shared his philosophy of ‘saying, doing and being’ with us.

“I believe that the first step towards helping others would be by saying. It is easy to do, but unfortunately the effect could be rather short-lived. The next step would be ‘doing’, as it is far more convincing to act than to say,” he paused.

“But the most difficult part is ‘being’. ‘Being’ implies a new identify, not as yourself a volunteer but as one of those whom you serve. It brings a new perspective, as you are no longer only helping the needy, but are also experiencing their difficulties and hardships.

“It brings you closer to those whom you are serving. Only when we have considered ourselves as one of the needy, can true transformation begin to flourish.”



*(Facing page)*

Dr and Mrs Chan met a group of mujahideen (“freedom fighters”) whilst travelling to the nearby eye camp

*(Top)*

This gentleman’s spectacles can be easily fixed with a little effort

*(Middle)*

Cataract operations in the rural eye camp

*(Bottom)*

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