



## Breaking through to youth: a preventive and holistic approach

*Interview of Dr Philemon Choi with student reporters*

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As the founder and honorary general secretary of *Breakthrough*, for the past many years Dr Philemon Choi Yuen Wan, SBS, JP has devoted his time to serving and reaching out to Hong Kong youth. This may seem like an unusual career change for a medical doctor, but as Dr Choi relates his story and his inspirations, it becomes obvious this was actually a natural transition.

### ***Becoming a doctor***

Dr Choi's path to medicine was challenging. Despite receiving various job offers following graduation from Form 5, Dr Choi decided to stay in school and studied science in Form 6. He disliked pure science, and with encouragement from his friends, he decided to pursue medicine. Unfortunately, he was rejected by the University of Hong Kong, but with his mother's support, he was able to study medicine in Canada. There, he kept company with a group of hardworking classmates, and was inspired by diligent professors who not only taught medicine, but also undertook volunteer work in Africa and other developing nations.

### ***From doctor to Breakthrough***

In 1971, Dr Choi returned to Hong Kong to practise as a medical doctor in the Evangel Hospital. He volunteered at a rehabilitation centre in the Kowloon Walled City, and was shocked to see that drug abuse so prevalent among young people. In his medical practice, he also noticed that many patients in Hong Kong had psychosomatic illnesses. The

main complaints of his patients were headaches, stomach cramps and sleeplessness, which could all have been induced and explained by stress. In 1972, Dr Choi met Miss Josephine So Yan Pui, a renowned writer dedicated to working with youth who later became Dr Choi's best friend and partner. Driven by their common passion and aspiration to help Hong Kong youth, they founded *Breakthrough* and began publishing the organisation's magazine in 1973.

The magazine quickly garnered attention due to its popularity. Following an interview broadcast on radio, the organisation also began a television programme in the same spirit as its publications. The concept behind *Breakthrough* was groundbreaking: the organisation became an interactive platform between the city and its youth, and started a dialogue centred on youth issues. Dr Choi found himself put more and more time into *Breakthrough* and youth work. In the mornings, he was a medical doctor, but in the afternoons, he ran *Breakthrough's* hotlines and counselling services, and also worked as a part-time editor for the magazine. Increasingly, he felt he had to make a decision about his career path, so he took time off and studied psychology abroad. When he returned in 1977, Dr Choi decided to dedicate himself, full-time, to *Breakthrough*.

Dr Philemon Choi is passionately and actively involved in community affairs through his work with various bodies dedicated to social improvement, including the Commission on Youth, Social Welfare Advisory Committee, and Action Committee Against Narcotics. The

good doctor also uses his talents as an author, penning self-help books for youth, such as his most recent publications *You Can Also Plan For Your Life* and *A Father Whom You Have Never Encountered*. Dr Choi built his reputation of humility and devotion through his speeches in schools, community centres, church fellowships and international conferences, where he generously shared his aspirations. As a symbol of his hard work and dedication to youth work, *Breakthrough* celebrated its 40th anniversary in March 2013.

### **The importance of primary prevention**

Dr Choi's training and experience as a medical doctor gave him unique insights to youth work. A key tenet in medicine is that prevention is better than cure, so his approach centred on prevention starting from early childhood. A major highlight of *Breakthrough's* success was its partnership and close cooperation with the Hong Kong Paediatric Society. Like him, his colleagues were committed to helping society, and together they advocated early intervention through educating parents and teachers. In 1996, Dr Choi collaborated with the Social Welfare Department to successfully implement the 'Understanding Adolescence Project' throughout Hong Kong primary and secondary schools. In 2001, Dr Choi developed the 'Hong Kong Student Information Form' with the aim of screening at-risk adolescents, by recognising and reporting early warning signs like behavioural changes. Dr Choi and his collaborators worked to build up resilience within identified individuals as a further step in prevention of risky behaviours among youngsters. They emphasised the concept of 'community paediatrics': reaching out to the community as a whole and promoting prevention and intervention at the earliest stages of life, before the problems escalate in young adulthood.

### **Three-dimensional holistic care**

Dr Choi's work focused on the holistic health of teenagers and stressed that doctors must approach their patients three-dimensionally. "A person is not an isolated biological existence; a person is very complex: behind them there is family, schooling, and the society at large." Dr Choi listed sex, drugs, and family tensions as the top three issues facing Hong Kong youth. So in addition to early prevention to address these, it was imperative to approach youngsters from a holistic perspective that puts them in their individual psychosocial context.

To drive his point home, Dr Choi related his experiences working in post-earthquake Sichuan. He observed that post-traumatic stress disorder and depression affected more people than physical injuries actually resulting from the earthquake. After the earthquake, survivors faced insurmountable difficulties, such as bereavements, disabilities and homelessness, and these were the stressors that drove many to suicide. Therefore, rehabilitation should not target physical problems only;



social support, counselling, and medicine for the soul are just as important as orthopaedic surgeons.

Dr Choi's chief message for medical professionals today is clear from his dedication to the prevention of problems affecting young persons and adopting a holistic approach to their care. He emphasises that doctors must view their patients as more than the summation of numerical data from medical investigations. As he put it, "I hope that the medical profession always remembers we are serving the community: one patient at a time, one family at a time."



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Dr Choi at the Leadership Academy,  
*Breakthrough*, 2011

(Bottom)  
Dr Choi: reaching out to youth via  
*Breakthrough*