

Pass on passion, pass on “loving heart”

Dr Jacob Wai-Tat Ng interviewed by student reporters

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In a recent interview with Dr Jacob Ng, he expressed no regret in having devoted almost all of his prime working life (spanning more than thirty years after graduating from the University of Hong Kong in 1974) to public service. He had pursued his lifetime passion to reduce patient suffering, incessantly seeking solutions to clinical puzzles as well as improvements in surgical techniques, no matter how small. From the inch-thick folders tucked under his desk, we found reprints of almost 150 of his original articles sharing his surgical experience.

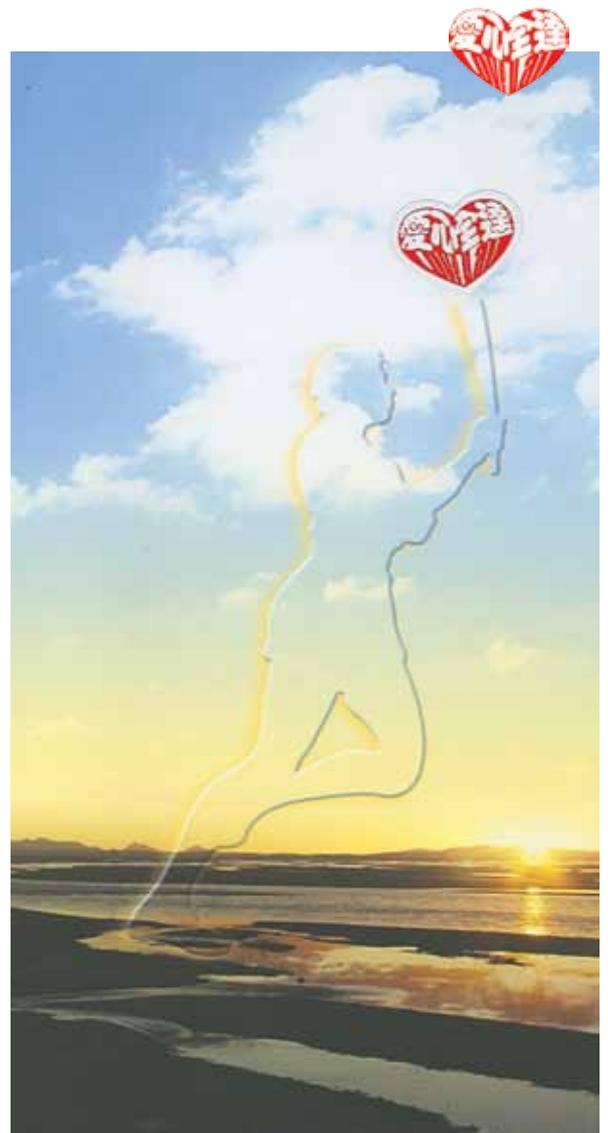
When asked about any once-in-a-lifetime encounters, he reminisced about fond memories. These included delivery of the first baby in the Princess of Margaret Hospital, publishing the first minimally invasive surgery paper from Hong Kong in a major scientific journal, performing an ultra-major emergency operation straddling Y2K, and reporting of the first local case of acquired immunodeficiency disease (AIDS) to *JAMA* in 1984. However, dearest to his heart was the inauguration of the unprecedented ‘Loving Heart Hospital Staff Award’ organised by his ‘Love U All Charitable Foundation’ (www.loveuallhk.org) in 2009, the year he left the Hospital Authority for private practice. In his opinion, having a loving heart is the most important attribute every health care worker must nurture.

Despite gradually being promoted to management posts, Dr Ng still exalts patients as his top priority. Amongst many others, we found in his records on a young man who coughed up lung tissue-like substance in the middle of the night, while convalescing at home on a tight plaster. The patient steadfastly refused admission owing to his intense fear of the hospital where his mother had just passed away. Sensing the possibility of pulmonary embolism, Dr Ng rushed to his home and patiently explained the dire consequence of not being treated. Finally, he drove the patient to the hospital and saved his life. Many patients were touched by his caring heart; some of them even became volunteers, and joined Dr Ng to serve fellow patients and later dedicated their time to disadvantaged groups in the community—a good example of the ‘contagious’ nature of love.

His work was later recognised by the community as he received the Medal of Honour (HKSAR) in 2000 and in 2007 the Award of Benevolence (organised jointly by the Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwanese Charitable Foundation and RTHK). An even bigger ‘award’ was invested on him in 2008. After learning the news that Dr Ng was to retire from the Hospital Authority, over 100 of his former patients and volunteers gave him a special

and invaluable gift—the formation of the ‘Love U All Charitable Foundation’ (愛心全達), named after him.

Despite the many challenges besetting a newly established charitable organisation, he accepted the mission. The intense driving force behind all his efforts is almost akin to the famous childhood fairy-tale *The Little Match Girl* written by Hans Christian Andersen over 160 years ago. We could feel that he gradually choked up when trying to recount the story of the hungry, little girl shivering in a dimly lit street corner fantasising about bread in the tiny glow of a lighted match, as no passer-by would consider buying her wares. She was found frozen at dawn. Even to date there are still many the likes of





'little match girls' around the world. Although 'Love U All' is a relatively 'young' organisation, it has already received million dollars in donations, and more than 100 voluntary charity initiatives have been implemented to care for disadvantaged children, and later on, also the aged and the handicapped in Hong Kong and the Mainland.

He could still recall an unforgettable experience during one of the twice-yearly poverty-relief trips his team would make to remote mountain villages to sponsor cataract surgery for hundreds of patients. One desolate old man had bilateral cataracts, but had also lost one hand. He needed to use the only hand left to constantly hold onto a walking stick. When he was offered a bag of rice, he felt very sad as he could find no way to hold it. The next day, his vision was restored and he was given extra red pocket money and food to carry home, he burst into tears and fell to his knees in front of the team. Due to poverty, many of the indigent villagers had never before seen 100-yuan RMB bank notes. It strengthened Dr Ng's belief that many shivering 'little match girls' are waiting for proper help.

Concerning the greatest difficulty faced when doing community service, he found it challenging to ensure that every cent received from donations was well spent on truly needy people. "There is now only one paid staff in the organisation, the others are all volunteers. Besides, we closely monitor how the money is spent. For example, for the cataract project, we went on-site to conduct means-tests and to select well-qualified local doctors willing to do the surgery at low cost. The postoperative progress of these patients was carefully monitored to ensure that the operations were performed well."

Moreover, Dr Ng is passionately interested in design work. Although he had not received any prior formal training at arts school, all except one of the illustrations in his publications were painstakingly drawn by him. The 'Love U All' logo and most of the promotional materials, including the front page of the Inauguration Ceremony booklet (*vide supra*) were designed by him. He had also created a dual purpose umbrella/stick cane that was distributed to thousands of needy elderly people.

Years ago, he and his colleagues have developed a cost-effective, heart-shaped mesh for laparoscopic hernia repair (*Surgical Practice* 2008;12:121-5), and in the course of time they won several awards for this device. But above all, he is particularly fond of the logo of the Hong Kong Thyroid Society, of which he was the founding Chairman (<http://hkthyroidsociety.org>). How wonderful it is to link up art, medicine, and charity!

Dr Ng sincerely hoped that more junior doctors could join to serve the local community and in other parts of the world. He understood that some of them may become frustrated due to work pressure, but he encouraged us to "stay passionate, and you will not be cold — because a 'match' is burning inside your body. If there is anything like 'loving heart' in your anatomy text, this is where it is — your heart." Let's pass it on!



(Facing page)

Part of the front page of the Inauguration Ceremony booklet of 'Love U All Charitable Foundation'

(Top)

Dr Ng presenting trophies to a winner of the Loving Heart Hospital Staff Award

(Middle)

Dr Ng examining indigent villagers after cataract operation

(Bottom)

Dr Ng showing his self-tailored heart-shaped laparoscopic hernia mesh