



Psychiatry with a scalpel — making smiles, changing lives

Interview with Dr Peter Pang

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What is the difference between finishing a task, and completing it? To finish a task, one uses it as a means to an end; but to complete a task, one must go above and beyond these expectations, and satisfy one's greatest judge: oneself.

To Dr Peter Pang, this distinction is the key to his approach to life. He trains himself to think outside the box and aspires to do more than what is socially expected, and these motivations drive his charity work.

Making smiles around the world

Dr Pang is a plastic surgeon who was awarded the Hong Kong Humanity Award in 2011 for his community services in Operation Smile International and Rotary International District 3450. After graduating from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1994, he started practising at the Prince of Wales Hospital and the Union Hospital. In 1999, his mentor inspired him to start a new journey and he volunteered to work in humanitarian aid with Operation Smile International. This commitment took him on missions to various countries including China, the Philippines, Kenya, and Cambodia, where he and his colleagues offered free surgery for patients with cleft lips and cleft palates.

In 2005, he joined the executive board of Operation Smile China Medical Mission. Through collaboration with his colleagues, he set up the first

Operation Smile Charity Hospital in Hangzhou and Kunming, which made medical care accessible to children suffering from cleft lip in the region. Currently, Dr Pang works in the Paragon Clinic in Central and continues his humanitarian work as President of the Rotary Club in the New Territories.

Patient needs, limited resources, and tough decisions

An overarching theme of responsibility towards people with limited resources colours Dr Pang's illustrious career. Cleft lip, although not life-threatening, has a serious impact on quality of life. Apart from the detriment to self-image and confidence, having a cleft lip also hinders speech and teeth development in children, which results in lifelong social, financial, and medical problems. In his 10 years of service with Operation Smile, Dr Pang has firsthand experience of the overwhelming need for cleft lip operations, postoperative speech training, and dental correction. He was frustrated that he could only perform about 40 operations per annual trip due to resource and logistical limitations. So, drawing inspiration from his role model Professor Arthur Li, Dr Pang traded the gratification of volunteerism for administrative work to recruit more doctors and exponentially increase the number of children he could help. However, as an administrator, Dr Pang faced new challenges and had to make tough decisions. What was to be the age

limit for children to receive corrective surgery? Who had higher priority? Who should benefit the most from the given resources?

Surgery: psychiatry with a scalpel?

Dr Pang refers to plastic surgeons as "psychiatrists with scalpels". He shares several stories to illustrate his point. On a mission in China, Dr Pang met a family with cleft lips in three consecutive generations. The elderly grandmother, who was wheelchair-bound, made a point to kneel and beg the doctors to operate on her daughter and granddaughter. He also met two brothers, aged 17 and 18 years, who both saw Operation Smile as a chance to change their school and job prospects. However, when the younger brother was offered the operation, he requested that the doctors operate on his brother instead, to help further the brother's career. Dr Pang also recalls encountering a child with a cleft lip that had never been kissed by his parents, because they had been

afraid to. Immediately after the operation, the child said he wanted to kiss his parents, and was finally able to show and receive the kind of parent-child affection that most people take for granted. Such examples illustrate how Dr Pang's operations go beyond restoring physical appearances: with the scalpel, by substantially changing the lives of his patients and giving them hope. In turn, Dr Pang witnessed humanity and selfless love, and in giving hope for the future, he felt he was bringing his work to completion.

Operation Smile and the future

Operation Smile continues to thrive for the betterment of children worldwide. As of writing, 27 more missions are planned in 2014, and will encompass countries in Southeast Asia to South America. For more information on the organisation's work and for ways to contribute, please visit www.operationsmile.org.

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The psychiatrist with a scalpel, changing this child's life forever

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Operation Smile brings professionals together from different parts of the world

