



An interview with Dr Buddy Wong

by: Wilfred S Wong and Michelle Tam
 Graduates from Faculty of Medicine
 The Chinese University of Hong Kong

It might be a universal truth that doing good is inherently moral, yet the reason why people do so varies. The ageing yet commanding and authoritative figure of Dr Buddy Wong Yat-kiu peered over us across the consultation room before answering our seemingly pedestrian question about why he did good. Despite the pause, his reply came without hesitation, “It is like drug addiction. It feels good, so you do it again and again.” A rather novel way of interpreting why anyone would try to help others, and with this thought in mind we began our interview with Dr Buddy Wong, a well-respected ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgeon in our community.

Dr Wong graduated from the University of Birmingham in 1970 and, subsequently, began his training in otorhinolaryngology. Back in 1989, Dr Wong was asked by the late Dr George Choa, the ‘grand-daddy’ of ENT surgeons, to join the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf. Initially, he joined in the capacity of a medical advisor on the board, with the aim to promote the well-being of the hearing impaired. Looking back over those years, Dr Wong laments that there was nothing much that could be done than to help the congenitally deaf to start hearing again. The opportunity came when the technology of cochlear implant was introduced in Hong Kong in 1995. Initially, the device was priced at US\$200 000 and, understandably, few could afford it. In a few years’ time, the government and the Hong Kong Adventist Hospital Foundation’s newly funded Children’s Hearing Fund came to their aid. Despite the new influx of cash and support, it was

not a straight path for Dr Wong and his colleagues, Dr Kelvin Liu and Dr LC Wong. The public was at first reluctant to embrace this form of treatment. A lot of parents had never heard of the technology, and most were concerned about the long-term efficacy and side-effects since there were not many long-term studies.

Dr Wong repeatedly emphasised that most of the deaf children are born with normal intelligence. Before introduction of the technology, most were banished to a life of menial jobs without the chance of higher education. In time, the benefit of the cochlear implant programme was evident for the public to see. Patients treated before the age of 5 years and those who were able to attend rehabilitation were nearly universally intelligible and attended mainstream schools.

Eight years ago, Dr Wong started partnering with Britain Nepal Otology Service (BRINOS) to further reach out to those in need. This is a charitable organisation founded in 1988 to tackle the prevalence of ear disease in Nepal, as a survey of disability conducted in 1981 found deafness to be the largest single disability in the country. At that time, there was only one ear surgeon and no funds for equipment. As a result, ear surgery camps were set up to reach out to people living far away from the capital. Every year, teams from overseas as well as Nepalese doctors would travel to these camps to deliver primary ENT care to the local residents.

Dr Wong and his team would travel annually to the Scheer Memorial Hospital in the historical town

*“It is like drug addiction.
It feels good, so you do it
again and again.”*

~ Dr Buddy Wong speaking about
his motivation for doing good



of Banepa. Unlike the cochlear implant programme in Hong Kong, the team focused on providing bread-and-butter ENT expertise. For most of the week, they would be repairing perforated tympanic membranes, treating cholesteatomas and holding out-patient sessions. In a mere week, they saw over 300 out-patients, fitted 30 hearing aids, and also performed several operations.

Although Dr Wong has had a career spanning over more than half a century, he showed that passion is the fuel that can keep our heart burning. Recently, Dr Wong was invited at a charity event to play the guitar while one of his former patients sang on stage. While Dr Wong played the guitar, the voice behind the songs reminded him of the reason why he set out to do what he has done. On a night to remember, he once again took the drug of his addiction to do good.



(Facing page)
One of the most memorable moments in Dr Wong's career: performing music with his former deaf patient

(Top)
Dr Wong led a team of local doctors during his annual trip to Nepal

(Middle)
Dr Wong and his team in Nepal

(Bottom)
Dr Wong (centre) and two student reporters, Wilfred and Michelle