



A mind that builds; a heart that serves—An interview with Dr Ben Fong

Dr Fong at a community lecture on first aid and home safety, co-organised by the Hong Kong College of Community Health Practitioners (photo courtesy of Dr Fong)

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Dr Ben Yuk-fai Fong, Associate Division Head of the Division of Science, Engineering and Health Studies at PolyU SPEED, developed an interest in Community Medicine from the very earliest days of his career. Since graduating from the University of Sydney over 30 years ago, Dr Fong has served in public, private, and university healthcare facilities in both Hong Kong and Sydney. Dr Fong has managed two local hospitals—Ruttonjee Hospital and Union hospital—and he was also the Deputy Medical Superintendent of the Prince Henry Hospital of the University of New South Wales in Australia.

Devotion to volunteering

Dr Fong's volunteer work began while he was still Medical Superintendent at Ruttonjee Hospital. Joining the Auxiliary Medical Service (AMS) in 1995, Dr Fong put his many years of experience in medical administration to good use. The AMS is composed of over 4800 healthcare professionals and lay volunteers, all working together to provide paramedical support in times of emergency and

first aid coverage for community events. As Senior Assistant Commissioner, Dr Fong played a crucial role in steering the development of the AMS towards providing more comprehensive and higher quality services. He helped set up the AMS Training Institute in 2000 and the First Aid Bicycle Team in 2002, as well as directing the medical support for large-scale events such as the Standard Chartered Hong Kong Marathon. Constantly striving for improvements, Dr Fong identified and addressed deficiencies in his team's capabilities, and suggested everything from increasing first aid stations during marathons to providing first aid training for other uniformed services.

Despite the demands of his other responsibilities, Dr Fong dedicated a great deal of his time to the AMS, including their training, recruitment, field work, and public services. "Volunteering gives me another kind of satisfaction," said Dr Fong, reflecting on his time in the AMS. When it comes to volunteering, Dr Fong advises that personal ambition and financial considerations should be kept out of the picture. "As a private

practitioner, providing free first aid services is bad for business”, he quipped. In his opinion, trying to rise through the ranks of a volunteer organization is simply a distraction from contributing what you can to society, inviting stress instead of fulfilment.

When compared to his previous duties as head and Chief Executive of local hospitals, where he had to meet strict performance indicators as expected by the Board, Dr Fong found his volunteer work to be a pleasant change of pace. A community medicine specialist, Dr Fong brought with him a unique perspective. When his colleagues fretted about volunteers leaving the AMS soon after completing training, seeing it as a waste of resources, Dr Fong pointed out that the volunteers would carry the skills and knowledge they learned into the community, and that individuals with paramedical training are useful assets to society regardless of whether they are in the AMS. After all, they might one day save lives, if they happen to be in the right place at the right time. In cases like these, his ability to see the long-term benefit to the population reflects the mindset of an experienced community medicine practitioner.

Advocacy of community health

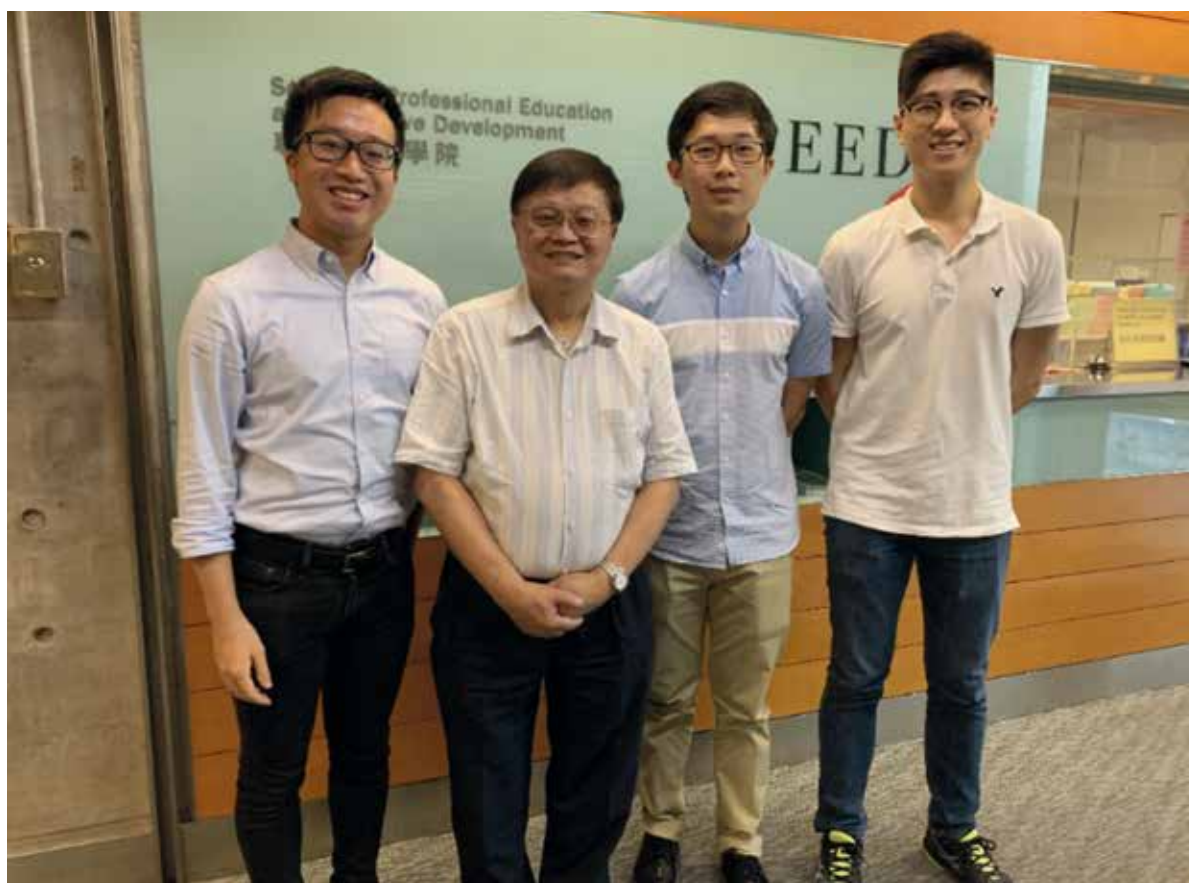
In addition to serving the public through both his work and during his free time, Dr Fong also wants

to make a change in society—to promote the concept of community health. With this in mind, he established the Hong Kong College of Community Health Practitioners (HKCCHP) in December 2017. His intention was not only to provide a platform for graduates to utilise their recently gained knowledge, but also to empower citizens with better health knowledge. During the 2019 outbreak of measles, members of the HKCCHP toured around the different districts of Hong Kong to give talks, hoping to raise awareness and educate the public regarding this highly contagious disease which had attracted wide media coverage and caused public fear.

Governmental directives and financial incentives are crucial to healthcare policy making, but ultimately healthcare is of the people, by the people, and for the people; thus, every stakeholder has a role to play in upholding community health. “Community health needs a more bottom-up approach, where everyone in society could take the initiative”, said Dr Fong. In 2003, Dr Fong helped to recruit local private general practitioners to visit and consult schools in Shatin, in line with the government’s “one school one doctor” policy. He also responded to the queries of readers of SkyPost and the Oriental Daily regarding the recent coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, proactively alleviating the concerns of many citizens.



Dr Fong (third from right) in the Auxiliary Medical Service (photo courtesy of Dr Fong)



Dr Fong (second from left) with student journalists (from left: Justin, Gordon and William) at PolyU SPEED

Dr Fong believes that community health practitioners play an important role in case management. Such an idea was seeded when he was working at Prince Henry Hospital, where Nursing Consultants were responsible for managing day cases for endoscopic lithotripsy performed by urologists, allowing the doctors more time to concentrate on their own trade. With an ageing population in Hong Kong, the shortage of human resources in healthcare has become an increasingly pressing issue. If community health practitioners were recognised as an independent component of the healthcare workforce as case managers, the expanded healthcare team could provide more effective, individualised, and holistic patient care.

Dr Fong revealed his excitement after learning that Kwai Tsing District Health Centre had recently established a post for community health practitioners—the first of its kind in Hong Kong after many years of promotional effort. “Just as we did not have much subspecialty training in Hong

Kong back when I first joined in 1985, now we are witnessing a revolution in health team reform,” he commented.

Looking forward

Working in public health is very different from treating individual patients. Dr Fong commented that one of the biggest takeaways from being a community medicine specialist is acquiring a wider perspective, “seeing the forest, not single trees”. Because community health and healthcare administration constantly deal with the big picture, Dr Fong advises that those who are interested should enjoy meeting people from different trades, be proactive in managing public provisions before problems occur, and persevere in community health interventions even though results might not be immediately apparent. Above all, he believes that serving the community requires commitment, devotion, and a good heart.