



A doctor without borders

Dr Fan Ning — his medical adventures and inspiring thoughts

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Having traversed three continents and over seven countries during his overseas missions at the frontline of war and natural disasters, Dr Fan Ning sat down for an interview at a local hospital on a peaceful Sunday morning. This allowed us to delve into his intriguing adventures.

Dr Fan's interest in emergency relief stemmed early on from his days of training in A&E departments before switching to surgery. In 2005, he embarked on his first overseas mission to Kenya for the Hong Kong Red Cross. He joined Médecins Sans Frontières – Hong Kong (MSF-HK) in 2007, and was elected its President the next year. Since then, he has participated in multiple MSF-HK voluntary trips to provide humanitarian relief to war-torn and disaster-struck areas, such as Sichuan, Haiti, Gaza, Libya and Sri Lanka, to name a few. In 2009, his work was finally recognised by virtue of receiving the Hong Kong Humanity Award, co-organised by the Hong Kong Red Cross and Radio Television Hong Kong.

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"Hong Kong has a relatively sound social infrastructure", remarked Dr Fan, when asked why he chose to undertake potentially perilous overseas missions, rather than focusing on local health. "In triage, one would naturally identify the victims in most dire need of help and attend to them first. Therefore, reaching out to Third World Countries is only right and justified."

One of the major reflections from Dr Fan's trips was

that people living in relatively prosperous cities should learn to count their blessings. "In Hong Kong, all who are sick are entitled to treatment. On the other side of the globe, they do not even have what we refer to as cheap drugs dispensed daily in Hong Kong. Some Hong Kongers might not realise how fortunate they are."

Back to basics

Nonetheless, embarking on such an overseas voluntary mission entails departure from one's comfort zone. It involves the medical system and team support, upon which one becomes reliant through the years. "In my first ever mission trip, as we approached our destination and the prevailing infrastructure appeared more and more backward, I became increasingly apprehensive as to whether we were truly capable of providing any aid", recollected Dr Fan. When the group finally reached the hospital, medical equipment was available, but it was the type found in Hong Kong 20-30 years ago and obsolete ever since.

It was at that juncture that he started to recall what Sir David Todd used to recapitulate back in the days he was in medical school. "MBBS is the most important part of your medical education; it lays the foundation for all your future medical practice", Dr Fan explained.

In an overseas mission, doctors are only limited to the luxury of X-ray, ultrasound and a limited number of blood test. History-taking, physical examination — the

very core and essence of medicine, became even more vital in fieldwork, when resources were scarce.

“A surgeon doesn’t need too much equipment either: give him scalpels, sutures and lights, and he can start operating.” In such environments where resources are so limited, mastery of basic medical skills come across as much more important than advanced technology.

Overcoming obstacles

As natural and man-made catastrophes may strike at any time, MSF volunteers sometimes have to respond at merely a few days’ notice. “It’s all about planning and time management”, Dr Fan remarked. “Of course, I am fortunate to have very understanding seniors and colleagues.”

Apart from difficulty getting leave from work, doctors may also find it hard to seek approval from family members. “In general, Chinese people appreciate acts of benevolence, but when it comes to their own children, it is only natural that they would be much more reserved.”

“It would not always be possible to get a green light from all the stakeholders in your life, but this is part of the self-management process. Occasionally, I have to be a bit selective about what I tell my family too”, he smiled.

One of the preparations a volunteer can make is to share his motives and opinions with his or her colleagues. This also leads to meaningful self-reflection and mental preparation. Asking the question, “Am I suited to go on such a mission?”, and whether one is ready to face dangers and infectious diseases, better prepares the volunteer psychologically.

To Dr Fan, the keywords for a successful medical volunteering are self-management, a heart to serve, and good appreciation of the work required.

Words of encouragement

“As a doctor in Hong Kong, one would have touched upon merely one-third of medicine and left the other two-thirds undiscovered. If you really like medicine, it is a good idea to help the remaining two-thirds in the world. The joy of being a doctor should be how to interact with a person, and not with a disease or a patient. One has to keep one’s momentum, or else one quickly becomes a mere technician.”

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(Facing page)
Dr Fan (second from left) and his team following up on a patient in a mobile surgical clinic in Gaza’s conflict setting in 2009

(Right)
Dr Fan (right back row) with the Orthopaedics and Traumatology team in Gaza (2009) that consisted of three other surgeons, an anaesthesiologist and a nurse from Japan, the Philippines, Libya, Cuba, and America