



## Looking beyond the boundary

*Interview of Dr Vincent Tse with student reporters*

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The Society for Life and Death Education of Hong Kong was established in 2006 with the aim of promoting thanatology in this locality, and focused particularly on the emotional, individual, and social aspects of death. We had the privilege to chat with Dr Vincent Tse, the Society's founding chairman, at the cafe in Queen Elizabeth Hospital, where he used to work before his retirement. We wondered just how many times he had had to deal with death over the course of a long and eventful career in oncology, and how that had motivated him to promote life and death education for the public.

Dr Tse estimated that, of the many patients he had attended to throughout the years, no fewer than 50% had been suffering from an incurable disease. He stated that for many doctors, such a figure would be indicative of dire professional failure. The 'denial' mentality, whereby the death of a patient was perceived as a loss, was all too common within the profession. He stressed, however, the importance of accepting the reality of death, in order to provide better care to those who could not be cured. In his view, palliative medicine was perhaps the most important medical speciality, for precisely that reason. In a city like Hong Kong, thousands of patients died from incurable diseases each year. By improving the capability of society as a whole to care for these patients, each individual can experience a significant improvement in the quality of his or her remaining life. This is where thanatology can help the most.

Although thanatology is studied academically, the Society for Life and Death Education focuses mainly on promotional work. This emphasis originated from Dr Tse's

belief that Hong Kong needed awareness of death-related issues more than it needed research into them. In Hong Kong, there was a very strong taboo on discussing death. Many patients and their families preferred not to speak of mortality at all, which might intensify negative attitudes and cause emotional damage. By arranging courses, lectures, and workshops on life and death education, the Society aims to break the taboo and promote greater open-mindedness towards the subject. Owing to its emphasis on promotion over research, in fact, many members are not health care professionals; social workers, educators, and even preachers of various faiths all contribute towards its goals. As it is a strictly non-profit organisation that is not funded by the government, almost all members work part-time on a voluntary basis. The sole exception is Dr Tse himself, who, since retiring, has worked for the Society full-time.

Expanding further on his experiences with the taboo against death in Hong Kong, Dr Tse recounted that on many occasions throughout his time in clinical practice, the families of his patients had requested that he not reveal to the patient the terminal nature of their diagnosis. Frequently, such requests were made out of fear that the shock of the disclosure would lead the patient to commit suicide. Such fears, however, were entirely irrational. Dr Tse's understanding of patient psychology was that patients tended to be aware when they were in the terminal stage of a disease, even if they did not know the precise diagnosis. Therefore, it was meaningless to hide the news from them. Furthermore, terminal patients typically denied their condition, which meant that suicide was actually less likely, since it was generally driven by

hopelessness. Denial, on the other hand, entailed a desire to hold on to the hope of life.

On the topic of changing the attitudes of health care professionals towards death, Dr Tse reiterated that its importance lay in its implications for the way incurable patients were cared for. For him, one particular incident that occurred in one of his wards highlighted the significance of this issue. A man in the final stages of liver cancer complained that he was “not dead, but socially dead”, as he felt ignored by the health care workers in the hospital. The patient’s statement, said Dr Tse, was a good illustration that it was this type of suffering that doctors needed to address, more so than the pain. It was vital to foster hope in patients, so that they could make the very best use of the time left in their remaining days. It was vital to encourage the spread of these values and behaviours in society, so that they become the norm.

Dr Tse acknowledged that the process of improving cultural views on death in Hong Kong would not be easy or quick. For such change to become at all possible, he believed it was essential to widen perspectives early. Introducing life and death education into classrooms was an idea that he was quite enthusiastic to pursue, particularly the establishment of thanatological courses as mandatory components of the medical degrees offered by both medical schools in Hong Kong. He also expressed his intent to continue teaching the thanatology course offered by the School of Professional and Continuing Education, which was first launched in October 2011. He also wanted to arrange public lectures, similar to the “Four Seasons of Life” series in 2008, and provide them more frequently and extensively.

Concluding the interview, Dr Tse noted that the recipient of the HA Employee of the Year Award in 2011 had for the first time been a mortuary attendant, which he took as a sign that on the whole outlooks on death were becoming more positive. For those interested in looking into the social and psychological sides of death, he strongly recommends the film “Red Beard” by Kurosawa and the book “Tuesdays with Morrie” by Albom.

(Facing page)

Dr Vincent Tse (left) giving a talk on thanatology and attitudes towards life and death. Photo provided by Buddhist Door

(Top)

A pamphlet advertising a sharing and discussion session on Kubler-Ross’s “On Death and Dying”, with Dr Vincent Tse as an honorary guest. Photo provided by Chinese Christian Literature Council

(Bottom)

Members of the Society for Life and Death Education answering questions at a public forum on the legalisation of euthanasia. This event was hosted by Dr Kit-Sing Au (far left), then Hospital Chief Executive of Kowloon Hospital. Photo provided by the Society for Life and Death Education

