



## Paediatrician in field hospitals: an interview with Dr Maggie Yeung

Dr Yeung on her way to a field hospital in Bangladesh

by: Nicole Lau, Year 3, The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
Ricky Yau, Year 4, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Dr Maggie Man-chow Yeung is a specialist in Paediatrics, the recipient of The Chinese University of Hong Kong Distinguished Medical Alumni Award (Humanitarian Service) 2019, and a long-time volunteer paediatrician at Hong Kong Red Cross (HKRC).

When Dr Yeung was just 9 years old, she saw a photo of a bone thin boy from Ethiopia in the newspaper. Moved by the level of starvation and deprivation this boy suffered, the young Dr Yeung started dreaming about treating sick children when she grows up. She reminds us, 'There are still many young children in impoverished parts of the world struggling to survive.'

Dr Yeung heard about the humanitarian services provided by HKRC. However, when she first inquired in 2002, Dr Yeung found out that the training programme was prioritising recruitment of surgeons and midwives at that time. Fortunately, recruitment of a broader spectrum of professions opened in 2007, enabling Dr Yeung to realise her childhood dream of treating sick children as a frontline doctor. Her journey began after taking a basic training course at HKRC and learning the necessary knowledge and skills to

work in and operate a Health Emergency Response Unit. Emergency Response Units are made up of a team of trained personnel and sets of standardised equipment that are deployed in emergency situations to provide functions and services such as logistics, IT and telecommunications, water and sanitation, relief, and base camp. Dr Yeung has been volunteering since 2008 in many different environments, including places affected by natural disasters, such as Sichuan and the Philippines, or where people affected have escaped to, such as Jordan and Greece.

'Flexibility is vitally important' says Dr Yeung. Although this is taught in the training course, it is only understood when practising adaptability in the field. In most missions that Dr Yeung was engaged with, the purpose of the Health Emergency Response Unit was mostly to support clinical services that had been disrupted by disasters. Often, the traditional customs and practices of the local people may lead them to reject antibiotics and other treatments. These logistical issues and cultural beliefs unique to local communities can hinder the delivery of effective healthcare. This is where adaptability comes into play. Dr Yeung believes in respecting local

customs while incorporating an appropriate portion of Western medicine into local situations. In Greece, she witnessed a patient with second- to third-degree burns who requested a witch doctor. ‘Miraculously, it worked, and we didn’t know why,’ recalls Dr Yeung. Many cultures and societies are naturally suspicious of “outsiders”. When such people feel that their local customs and practices are respected by the foreign humanitarian workers, they are more likely to trust in these foreigners and become more receptive to the services provided by the Emergency Response Unit in their community. There are bound to be limitations of Western medicine in these locations, especially with the occasional unavailability of equipment. It is therefore essential that humanitarian workers can adjust their mindset before every mission, and can exercise flexibility to meet the needs of their patients in various ethnic communities.

Among the many overseas humanitarian missions that Dr Yeung has been on, what has touched her most is the way displaced people value their family. Surviving in a disaster when personal safety is jeopardised and uncertainties prevail, Dr Yeung noticed that many displaced people place family ahead of their own health and wealth. On

one occasion, Dr Yeung was taking care of a mother who had just given birth in a field hospital in Jordan a few hours before. This woman requested to return to the camp so that she could be with her family. Recovering from the pain of delivery seemed less imminent than being with her loved ones. These anecdotes were not rare among displaced people. None of them knew what might come next—more damage and destruction, sudden injuries or deaths, but rarely the end of chaos. Staying close to family during times of such uncertainty and upheaval is a lesson Dr Yeung well learned.

Family provides a sense of emotional security and comfort that is necessary in building the determination to survive through difficult times and unpredictable missions. Even distance cannot separate family. Dr Yeung feels deeply that nothing is more powerful a driving force than support from her family. Before embarking on a mission, Dr Yeung always seeks support and approval from her family. On one occasion, after returning home from a particularly exhausting mission, she was greeted with a smile and the comment, ‘You smell!’ Dr Yeung read between the lines and knew that her family misses her and supports her no matter what.



A thin bamboo footbridge in Bangladesh. ‘Beneath that thin bamboo footbridge was muddy water. We had to cross it to build a field clinic up on the hill, with or without muddy water soaking our clothes,’ remarks Dr Yeung. ‘Thinking about my family in such difficult conditions gave me strength to endure such difficult conditions.’



Dr Yeung (right) and HKMJ student reporter, Nicole Lau (left) attending the interview at the Hong Kong Red Cross headquarters in West Kowloon, Hong Kong

The picture of the starving boy in Ethiopia has stuck with Dr Yeung in every one of her missions. It has motivated her not only to improve the physical condition of her patients, but also to let them know that someone cares about their existence and well-being. As a volunteer of the HKRC, Dr Yeung has been trained to work closely with members of the local medical communities so that clinic services initiated by humanitarian workers can continue even after they leave.

Through sharing her experiences in

humanitarian work, Dr Yeung wants to prepare future medical volunteers for potential challenges and frustrations in the field. More importantly, she shows us that it is the heart that values human dignity and human life that enables frontline humanitarian workers to overcome obstacles in the field. Dr Yeung finds true meaning in her work by using the ability to heal to achieve humane outcomes for impoverished communities. As Hippocrates wrote, “Wherever the art of medicine is loved, there is also a love of humanity.”

The Hong Kong Red Cross recruits volunteers, including doctors, nurses, and other professionals, to participate in overseas emergency health missions. For more information, visit the website: <https://volunteer.redcross.org.hk>