



Delivering hope in hepatology: an interview with Professor Grace Lai-hung Wong

by: Maegan Yeung¹, Caitlin Yeung²

¹ Year 4 MBBS, The University of Hong Kong

² Year 6 MBBS, The University of Hong Kong

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Prof Grace Lai-hung Wong's tenacity and passionate humanitarian spirit have fuelled her career at the forefront of tackling various gastrohepatic conditions in Hong Kong.

From humble beginnings: excellence is no accident

Prof Wong attributes her first forays into the medical system to a series of accidents, including an actual traffic accident during her first year of secondary school that left her with a broken femur. Experiencing the doctor-patient relationship from the patient's side in her formative years not only bolstered her desire to become a doctor, but also helped Prof Wong understand the importance of viewing the situation from the patient's perspective. This conviction shaped her career over the years to come.

Nonetheless, Prof Wong's success is, by no means, an accident. Looking back, Prof Wong attributes her unyielding tenacity and determination to her humble grassroots upbringing. She recalls growing up in a cramped 100-square-foot rental flat that could barely fit a wardrobe and a bunk bed. During that time, she took great inspiration from her father who, in order to support his family, worked as a construction worker and never took a day off. These circumstances in her early development instilled an unshakable work ethic and steeled her

to excel in her academic pursuits. An outstanding student at secondary school, Prof Wong became the Tuen Mun district top scorer in the public exams and successfully enrolled to study medicine at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

Clinical trials and tribulations

During her time as a trainee Medical Officer at the CUHK Department of Medicine and Therapeutics, Prof Wong met her mentor Prof Henry Chan, who noticed her blossoming research talent. As a budding researcher, Prof Wong found that the publication process is laden with rejection and disappointment. Despite this, Prof Wong persevered with her research, starting with a small retrospective cohort study, and quickly established a prolific research profile. Her research has been recognised in Hong Kong and internationally through various awards and prestigious lectureships, including the Young Investigator Award of the Asian Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver, the Distinguished Research Paper Award for Young Investigators of the Hong Kong College of Physicians, the Hong Kong College of Physicians Sir David Todd Lectureship, and the JGH Foundation Emerging Leader Lectureship. Today, Prof Wong continues to work as clinical professor at the Department of Medicine and Therapeutics, Institute of Digestive Disease, and State Key Laboratory of Digestive Diseases of CUHK.

New life new liver: giving back to society

Outside of the clinic, Prof Wong is an avid humanitarian. Her long-standing involvement in charity work began when she was a medical student, where she participated in service trips to rural areas in mainland China. In recent years, she has been heavily involved in the New Life, New Liver programme jointly launched by the Center for Liver Health of CUHK and the non-government organisation Caritas Lok Heep Club.

New Life, New Liver is a targeted screening, assessment, and education programme to help efforts towards the elimination of hepatitis C virus (HCV) in high-risk individuals, such as people who

inject drugs. The programme aims to raise awareness about HCV in underprivileged and at-risk groups by distributing books and brochures and holding talks on HCV infection, complications, and treatments. At these educational sessions, point-of-care anti-HCV testing is available. Individuals who screen positive can be recommended to attend follow-up examinations at local hospitals or hepatology units, and support can be provided to improve medication adherence.

As a result of the efforts of the New Life, New Liver programme, Prof Wong noted drastic improvements in the targeted individuals, many of whom are homeless or marginalised. Among the patients, only one in five were willing to receive medical treatment, and there initially were many



Prof Grace Wong overseeing work at The Chinese University of Hong Kong's Medical Data Analytics Centre



Hong Kong Medical Journal Student Reporters Maegan Yeung (left) and Caitlin Yeung (right) interview Prof Grace Wong (bottom)

difficulties in engaging these at-risk populations to participate in the programme: “It is incredibly difficult to get a homeless patient to care about their liver when they have more pressing issues on their mind, such as what their next meal is, or where to sleep that night.”

In the 9 years that the programme has been running, there has been a notable increase in treatment uptake. The collaborative efforts of experienced professionals across medical and sociological fields towards the elimination of HCV in Hong Kong lifts the burden of disease from patients, allowing them to move on and pursue their dreams. However, Prof Wong notes that there is still a lot of work to be done. The programme has an important place in her heart as she experienced the camaraderie and wealth of expertise from working with the multidisciplinary team of healthcare professionals and experienced social workers.

Future perspectives: regeneration and mutations

In recognition of her contributions to society, Prof Wong was awarded the Ten Outstanding Young Persons Award in Hong Kong in 2014. She credits her mentor, Prof Henry Chan, for providing her

with research opportunities early in her career and guiding her through the application. As the Assistant Dean (Learning Experience) at the CUHK Faculty of Medicine, Prof Wong is tasked with mentoring medical students. Just as the liver regenerates, Prof Wong hopes that this new generation will ‘regenerate’ the medical profession.

Currently, Prof Wong is also Director of the newly established CUHK Medical Data Analytics Centre, and is currently working with a multidisciplinary group of experts in computer science and biostatistics to build models and artificial intelligence systems from large-scale clinical data to aid early detection of gastrohepatic conditions. “Just as hepatitis C viruses mutate very quickly to acquire drug resistance,” says Prof Wong, “we as doctors need to ‘mutate’ too. We need to be flexible and find new ways to improve the efficiency and efficacy of our treatments, to provide the best possible treatment for our patients.” On her online profile, Prof Wong describes herself as “a hepatologist, a researcher and a mother of three kids who loves to sing.” However, this interview showed that she is more than that. Serving as a role model to doctors and medical students, Prof Wong also provides hope to her patients by embracing not only clinical but also technological advances.