



Dr Shannon Chan (left) with a newly delivered infant in the war-torn Yemen

Hope and healing without borders: an interview with Dr Shannon Melissa Chan

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Recently, there has been extensive news coverage of the ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and current geopolitical conflicts in Eastern Europe. Although they often seem far from Hong Kong, human conflicts and infectious diseases have always been major causes of suffering around the world. Dr Shannon Melissa Chan, an upper gastrointestinal surgeon and assistant professor from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, exemplifies what doctors can do to provide help and a glimmer of hope to those experiencing such humanitarian crises.

Since completing her general surgery fellowship in the Prince of Wales Hospital, Dr Chan has been closely working with Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières; MSF) to provide surgical care globally. When asked about the reasons behind her joining MSF missions, Dr Chan expressed that it has always been a pursuit for her to serve the less fortunate, and she felt that she could do more on top of her usual duty of surgery, endoscopies, and clinics. It was also to remind herself to reconnect with her passion to help patients and save more lives.

The application process into surgical missions was not an easy one. Even as a young Fellow trained in general surgery, Dr Chan initially did not fulfil the technical requirements, as MSF expects a very broad surgical exposure including orthopaedic procedures, obstetric and gynaecological operations, simple neurosurgical procedures, such as Burr hole, and even nephrectomy. Dr Chan was not deterred, and arranged a 1-month rotation to the obstetrics and gynaecology department where she put in great effort to gain as much knowledge and acquire as much operative experience as possible. “I was learning from trainees who taught me Caesarean sections.” Dr Chan recalls. She even went to help neurosurgeons and orthopaedic surgeons on her call nights, assisting with emergency surgeries. With the necessary experience completed, and annual leave saved up, she was ready for her first mission.

Dr Chan’s first 3-month MSF mission was to South Sudan in 2016. In addition to the usual surgical conditions seen in Hong Kong, she was exposed to a variety of new scenarios not previously seen, ranging from arrow injury to schistosomiasis.

Creative thinking was also often required because of the limited available resources; she had to use kitchen pots as surgical step stools during operations, and created a make-shift ileostomy bag using a coffee jar lid. During the 3-month mission, Dr Chan was able to help many patients with her surgical skills. Even the local witch doctor, who was initially sceptical and discouraged patients from seeking help from Western medicine, grew to respect her work and the effective interventions. “The patients were also very grateful,” Dr Chan explains, “and I would know that because the next day I would find them self-discharged from the hospital, leaving a chicken in their stead as a token of appreciation.”

In late 2019, Dr Chan went on her second MSF mission, this time to Mocha in Yemen. Mocha is situated only 2 hours from an active war zone, and Dr Chan experienced the ugly and destructive power war up close. Every night, she could hear explosives and gunshots, and injured civilians would be transferred to her centre to be stabilised and treated. She had to perform amputations for many patients with non-salvageable limb injuries due to landmines, and damage control operations for those with multiple gunshot wounds. Dr Chan also recounted how some patients succumb and others who get caught up repeatedly in the armed conflict. While as doctors we can heal individuals of their medical conditions, we are unable to heal the larger circumstances. However, Dr Chan does not believe that the clinical efforts under these situations are futile. Instead, the fact that there are doctors available at all is already an act that preserves human dignity. These efforts represent a message of hope to the community. After all, to the war-torn region, the beacon of hope is vital.

For her brave service with MSF, Dr Chan was awarded the Hong Kong Humanity Award in 2021. When congratulated, she merely said “It was volunteering work to help people, and I never expected there would be awards.” In a way, the best reward has been the hope that she was able to sow in those who she aided.

The deep care Dr Chan has for those in need is not only limited to the overseas missions, but also extends to those closer to home. Just the weekend before our interview with her, she was busy coordinating and participating in the first part of a community COVID-19 vaccination programme in Kowloon. The programme is targeted mainly at kindergarten and primary school students, improving the accessibility of COVID-19 vaccinations and protecting this vulnerable group from the pandemic. For 2 days, Dr Chan and doctors from multiple specialties provided 1300 jabs to children. In addition, as part of the programme, there will be collaborations with local non-government organisations to arrange vaccination and clinical



Dr Shannon Chan (left) used the pictured kitchen pot as a platform during operations, as the Sudanese are all quite tall



Dr Shannon Chan (middle) at the recently held community COVID-19 vaccination programme

outreach services to the population of elderly living alone.

Even in her career as a surgeon-researcher, Dr Chan displays her inclination towards helping those less fortunate. With her interest in pseudomyxoma peritonei, a rare entity that is undertreated, she has been performing cytoreductive operations on affected patients. Although these complex surgeries take up extremely long hours, Dr

Chan performs them gladly to give her patients a fighting chance.

Dr Chan's many endeavours demonstrate the variety of ways how doctors can contribute to the community. Perhaps not everyone can meet the stringent recruitment criteria of MSE, but as long as we have the will to help, it is without a doubt that everyone can find a way to bring hope to those who need it.