



Prof Woo with the tree planted in his honour at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Trailblazing primary care for a healthier city: an interview with Professor George Woo

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<https://doi.org/10.12809/hkmj-hc202304>

Professor George Woo, the ‘father of optometry’ in Hong Kong, began his career by establishing the first optometry programme in Hong Kong, and his tale is a valuable lesson in commitment, perseverance, and resourcefulness. In 1973, Prof Woo approached The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) with the idea of setting up the first optometry school in Hong Kong. After many years, it has evolved from a certification course in 1978 into a five-year degree programme, granting students the degree of Bachelor of Science in Optometry.

One can attribute this evolution to Prof Woo’s continued commitment to healthcare in Hong Kong. His years of working with and nurturing the next generation of clinicians are a compelling reminder that healthcare professionals are leaders, servants, and pillars of their communities.

Career

Prof Woo is humble about his contributions to the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at PolyU; he recalls his happiness at seeing the first cohort from the Professional Diploma in Optometry graduate in 1987, witnessing the fruit of the faculty.

He humourously recalls how he swore he would retire after helping the faculty transition to a fleet of Bachelor of Science programmes in different disciplines; he laughs when he admits he did not retire.

Prof Woo has been advocating for improvements in the Hong Kong healthcare system for the past 30 years, focusing on the limited availability and scope of primary care. While he acknowledges the government’s strides in improving the availability of primary care within District Health Centres, their narrow scope led to severe underutilisation. He firmly believes in expanding the District Health Centre’s purview to allow for the provision of a more comprehensive range of primary care services, such as traditional Chinese medicine practitioners, full-time pharmacists, optometrists, dentists, occupational therapists, and physiotherapists. On-site holistic healthcare can relieve the burden on primary care doctors, improving the distribution of resources and manpower. Better usage of all dimensions of primary care can also enhance the professional-patient relationship; rather than shuttling a patient between various doctors and referrals, a single professional

with the relevant expertise, and who could track patient progress, would significantly improve the primary healthcare experience.

Prof Woo laments that little change has been achieved over the years due to rigid rules and regulations, and despite him actively passing 17 items for legislation while serving on the Supplementary Medical Professions Council for 10 years. He raised continuing medical education as an example, where the lack of training for primary care physicians overshadows Hong Kong's robust training for specialists. Other countries have been pursuing continuing education for 60 to 70 years but Hong Kong's efforts have fallen behind. A gleam of hope appeared in 2021, when compulsory continuing education was required for optometrists. However, due to the complexity of the healthcare system, change in Hong Kong is hampered by political and professional interests, as well as the divide between the public and private sectors. With the current trajectory, Prof Woo mournfully states that he doubts meaningful change will come in his lifetime.

Humanitarian work

In addition to being a leader in his field, Prof Woo continues to be an avid hotline volunteer for the Samaritans, which he has done for over 20 years. The Samaritans is a non-profit organisation offering a 24-hour multilingual hotline service run by volunteers who provide emotional support to people who are in distress or suicidal. Prof Woo realised the importance of personal, human-to-human interactions for one's wellbeing early on; he recalls how, as a student, he would volunteer to provide health services at an elderly care home. At the time, he noted that the older adults were less concerned about their health complaints, but instead treasured the chats and personal time spent with them. It was then that he realised a caring, empathetic touch was just as important to wellbeing as the scientific aspect of healthcare. He was first inspired to join the Samaritans when he understood that helping patients was beyond just medicine and surgery. As he began to identify the link between mental health and visual problems, he knew it was his duty as a practitioner to help patients to heal physically and mentally. Over the years, Prof Woo felt a sense of gratitude towards the hotline as it helped him gain a deeper understanding of the complex issues regarding mental health in the city. With over 2000 hours of volunteer work under his belt, it broadened his horizons and helped him empathise with and understand his patients better. In 2015, Prof Woo became the chairman of the Samaritans Board of Directors, where he expanded their services beyond hotline help and lent support by introducing many outreach programmes, such as



Prof Woo with the student reporters, Henry (left) and Man-tsin (right)



Prof Woo in the optometry clinic at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

the Supporting the Aged Responsibly Programme, or STAR, aimed at improving the mental health of the elderly population.

To this day, Prof Woo continues to don his headset and answer phone calls for the hotline with the hopes that providing a listening ear can help people rise above difficult moments in their lives. In 2020, Prof Woo was awarded the Hong Kong Humanity Award, bestowed upon those who exemplify the very spirit of humanity in service and commitment to their community by putting it into action and practice. 'I will walk with them as long as they want to walk further to improve their quality of life,' affirms Prof Woo, as he continues his mission of curing wounds invisible to the eye. He hopes that as he continues to serve in the future, more academics and medical professionals will step out of their comfort zones and volunteer to help.

Mission to nurture the next generation

Those who decide to bear the Hippocratic Oath will find no shortage of mentors, especially Prof Woo, who will shape them and provide them with the skills, knowledge, and insight needed to one day enter the field and serve the community.

Prof Woo continues to come to PolyU to mentor students and perform research. Regarding his students as blank sheets of paper, he believes it is his duty both to shape the way that they see the world and to teach them about the healthcare system that they will one day work in and, hopefully, transform for the better. His establishment of the field of optometry is only the first step in what he sees as a mission to improve Hong Kong's healthcare systems and prepare those who serve within it.