



Looking beyond sexual health: an interview with Dr William Chi-wai Wong

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Fifteen years ago, as a freshly qualified general practitioner from the UK, Dr William Chi-wai Wong bravely embarked on a trip to Yunnan to work alongside the organisation ‘Save the Children’ to advocate and inform individuals about sexual health and HIV prevention. “I was actually quite reluctant about helping sex workers at the start, as many of us would be, because our training and understanding in this area is so limited.” Negative attitudes of the government, reluctance of brothel owners, and most important of all, general stigmatisation by society, provided Dr Wong with an insight into how culture and societal norms could influence an individual’s health-seeking behaviour.

After returning to Hong Kong, Dr Wong approached local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as AFRO (Action for Reach Out) and Zi Teng (紫藤) in search of opportunities to help sex workers. Nonetheless, as a university professor with numerous research interests and publications, his enthusiasm and passion for sexual health was initially met with skepticism on the part of NGOs—they were worried that academics like Dr Wong were just offering help in order to collect data for their research. Undeterred by this setback, Dr Wong utilised his expertise as a clinician and offered free consultations and counselling to sex workers. His contributions were finally welcomed by NGOs and he had the chance to further expand his work. Increased resources and support also allowed the setting up of outreach clinics, screening tests, and laboratory services, chiefly run by NGOs but medically facilitated by willing doctors and nurses. Over the years, Dr Wong has taken up advisory positions for

multiple NGOs, including working as an executive committee member for AFRO, on top of his primary roles as Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Hong Kong and Honorary Consultant at the Ap Lei Chau General Out-patient Clinic and The University of Hong Kong-Shenzhen Hospital.

Through his work and research, Dr Wong realised that much more must be done for these women aside from just treating and preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Sex workers are exposed to multiple health risks such as alcoholism, illicit drug use, and violence; STIs are only a small part of the problem. To complicate matters, some sex workers are illegal immigrants and not eligible for public health care. For those who are, irregular working hours and fear of stigmatisation make it difficult to fully utilise health care resources. Dr Wong believes that alternative care should be provided for sex workers and extra steps have to be taken to help this disadvantaged group. Gradually, Dr Wong has shifted the focus of his work from sexual health to holistic care, as is the case in all good family medicine practice. He has worked on issues such as mental health, quality of life, social networking, and human rights, not only advocating these but also teaching the next generation of doctors by offering elective placements at some of these NGOs.

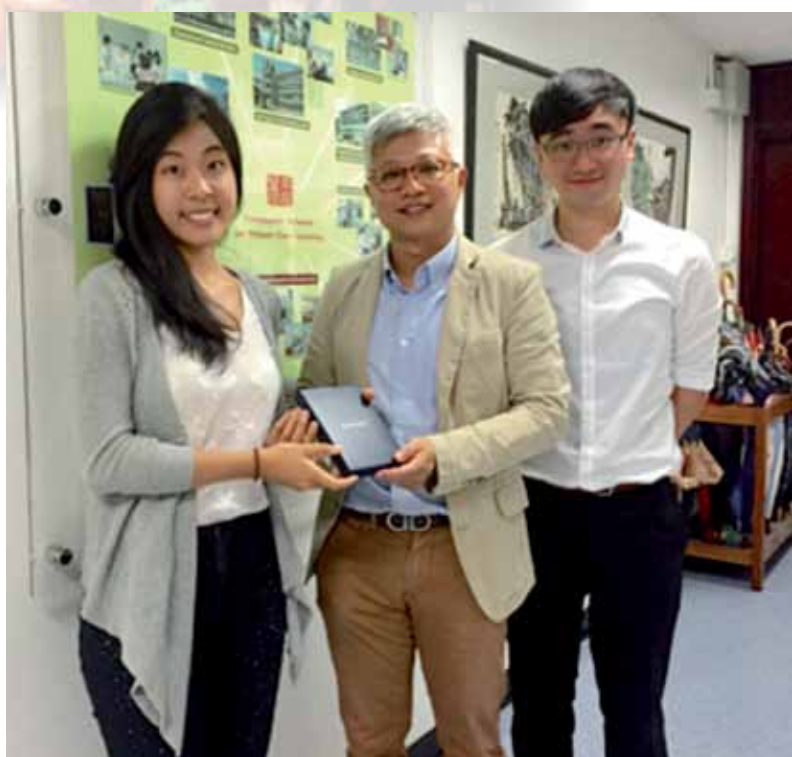
Slowly but surely, Dr Wong is starting to see the fruits of his labour. The topic of sex workers, albeit still heavily stigmatised, is beginning to be received differently by the general public. Funding for outreach clinics is increasingly procurable, and a more humane approach is being adopted by law enforcers in the confrontation of suspected

sex workers. The possession of condoms was once legally accepted as supporting evidence in police prosecutions. Such guidelines have since been superseded, but Dr Wong and the NGOs are trying to advocate for further changes, by requesting that one be spared any enquiry at all pertaining to the ownership of condoms, a practice that, if allowed to persist, is likely to aggravate the health risks inherently associated with work in the sex industry.

Looking ahead to the future, Dr Wong envisages an even broader focus for his work. A firm believer in holistic care, he hopes to help safeguard the general physical and mental health of these disadvantaged women, promote human rights for

this subpopulation, and ameliorate the prevailing societal backdrop and preconceptions about the sex industry. Dr Wong, more than anyone else, recognises how traditional culture and established norms can completely dictate an individual's health-seeking behaviour.

On a more personal level, Dr Wong cherishes the sense of fulfilment he earns from his work. Interacting with sex workers who yield their bodies to others every day, he sees immense value in being able to share their problems and thoughts. "Their minds are the only thing they still have all to themselves. Being able to share that, and to help them where I can, is a very meaningful act."



(Facing page)
Outreach clinic run by 'Action for Reach Out', providing free health checks for women engaged in the local sex industry (photo source: <http://www.afro.org.hk/EN/clinic.php>)

(right)
(from left) Student reporter Alison Chan, Dr William Wong, and student reporter Rex Hui