



Sustainable volunteering: an ophthalmologist's work

An interview with Dr Emmy Li

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A quick online search on Dr Emmy Yuen-mei Li will reveal the profile of a well-regarded ophthalmologist who received the Hong Kong Humanity Award in 2014. Her 'Cataract Free Zone' initiative of Project Vision in Hainan performed some 30 000 cataract surgeries in rural Chinese villagers and trained over 10 mainland doctors. Impressed by her stellar record of volunteering, we were curious to know how Dr Li views her large volume of charitable work. Without the slightest hesitation, Dr Li said, "These statistics are just numbers. They do not tell us of the sustainability of the volunteering work—which is what I most hope to achieve."

"Cure sometimes, relieve often, comfort always"

Dr Li graduated with Honours from the University of Hong Kong and attained a Master's degree with distinction in Public Health in 2010. As an undergraduate, Dr Li actively participated in community services and health checks all over Asia, from the slums of India to the minefields of Cambodia. She witnessed the stifling effects of extreme poverty, and was reminded of the inherent privileges enjoyed by all citizens of Hong Kong. Dr Li believes these great privileges come with a responsibility. A responsibility to serve beyond the narrow limits of our immediate surroundings and heighten our awareness of the world's hardships and poverty.

Dr Li has dutifully attended to such responsibilities. Her work both at home and in Hainan has earned her a long list of awards, including the Ten Outstanding Young Person 2014, Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology Outstanding Service in Prevention of Blindness Award, and The 5th Hong Kong Volunteer Award from the Agency for Volunteer

Service in 2013, to name a few. Despite the prestige afforded by these awards, Dr Li is most happy about the concomitant increase in opportunities to share her spirit of doing good with the younger generation.

"The influence of one person is limited. Only through mobilising communities and recruiting larger volunteer base can such efforts be sustained and propagated." Indeed, Dr Li is very much involved with the promotion of youth volunteering and public education. She collaborated with the Education Bureau to promote good eye care practice in more than 500 schools, and has been writing articles on ophthalmic disorders on AM730 (a Chinese-language newspaper) since 2007. Outside of her specialty, Dr Li served as the co-chairman in the Election of Ten Outstanding Warriors of Regeneration to recognise individuals with physical or mental challenges.

Dr Li has also been committed to Ripple Action, a programme jointly run by the Hong Kong Women Doctors Association (HKWDA), Association of Women Accountants, the Hong Kong Federation of Women Lawyers, women nurses, social workers, and the International Social Service (Hong Kong Branch). The HKWDA provides medical services to underprivileged women, such as new immigrants and ethnic minorities. Cervical screening has been chosen as one of the leading projects to raise awareness on female health.

"Women from marginalised groups may not be sufficiently informed on sexually transmitted diseases or cervical cancer. These topics are often left unexplored between husbands and wives." In recent years, through the generosity of the Zonta Club of Hong Kong, Ripple Action has expanded its services to provide human papillomavirus vaccination. Under the programme's community-wide partnership, volunteering accountants and lawyers give talks

on financial literacy and offer legal advice about domestic violence.

“I view it as a step towards reversing the ‘inverse care law’. Very often, those most in need of medical or social care also happen to be the most deprived of such resources,” explained Dr Li.



Dr Emmy Li has been committed to Ripple Action (top) and has received the Hong Kong Humanity Award (middle) and Hong Kong Ten Outstanding Young Persons Award (bottom)

‘Teach a man to fish’, rather than ‘Give a man a fish’

As we sat down with Dr Li on a chilly Thursday evening, we wondered how the amicable mother-of-two finds time to volunteer on top of being an associate consultant at the Hong Kong Eye Hospital. She replied with a light laugh, “Community services are deeply rewarding.”

Dr Li’s immense sense of fulfilment derives not merely from her personal experience in patient care, but from helping those she has inspired, such as the ophthalmologists she has trained in Project Hainan. “It was like witnessing the development of a young seedling that I planted into a robust, branching tree,” described Dr Li. She repeatedly emphasised that the project was not about completing as many cataract surgeries as possible by the volunteering ophthalmologists from Hong Kong, but to assist in building a self-sustainable eye care infrastructure in Hainan by cultivating local ophthalmologists.

Despite this lofty goal, the organising committee faced several obstacles along the way. One of their prime concerns that remains a top priority for Dr Li was the quality of cataract surgeries performed. In Project Hainan, free surgery does not imply substandard medical care. A comprehensive Quality Assurance Scheme and Surgical Review Committee were devised to ensure that trainees mastered the requisite surgical skills and retained a thorough understanding of each process. The entire cataract surgery was divided systematically into 10 structural steps. Prior to entering an operating theatre, trainees have to practise every single stage meticulously with pigs’ eyes. Their work is then sent to Dr Li for comment and feedback. During the actual surgery, trainees will complete only 10% to 20% of the operation each time under the supervision of an experienced mentor, who will be responsible for completing the procedure.

Owing to her background in public health, Dr Li also led a pioneering effort to incorporate research into humanitarian work in Hainan. An epidemiological study sought to determine the prevalence rate of cataract and the barriers that prevented villagers from seeking surgery. These data were subsequently provided to the government for future ophthalmic planning.

Echoing her priority for sustainability and youth involvement, Dr Li said “We hope that such knowledge transfer would lead to a continuous education of young ophthalmologists in Hainan. It is far more essential to teach men to fish than merely giving men a fish.”

Before we left, Dr Li invited us to visit one of her community service projects in Hong Kong. “Even a simple display of sincerity can accumulate into a ripple effect in the long run,” she said wholeheartedly, with a glimmer of hope in her eyes.