

Families love to have pictures with voluntary workers to show and tell their children when they grow up, "when you were young, a Christian surgical team did a free operation on you, so you should help any needy people whenever you can"



## Putting a smile on children's faces: an interview with Dr Bernard Sik-kuen Chow

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*In this issue of Doctor for Society, we interviewed Dr Sik-kuen Chow, who was awarded a 2017 Hong Kong Humanity Award by the Hong Kong Red Cross and Radio Television Hong Kong. The award gives 'tribute to individuals in society who exemplify the very spirit of humanity by putting it into practice and action.'*

A smile can brighten up your entire day. For those with cleft palate, the clichéd axiom rings especially true when the ability to properly smile can brighten up an entire life. Dr Bernard Sik-kuen Chow, a plastic surgeon with three decades of experience, has devoted himself to putting back precious smiles on the face of children with congenital defects. Dr Chow has worked hard for years as the chairman of the HIS Foundation (天鄰基金會), a non-profit Christian charitable organisation focused on helping the impoverished in China. Along with the cleft lip and palate surgical team of the HIS Foundation, he has been toiling away to offer patients a better life.

As we watched the twilight sun rapidly fading, Dr Chow sat in his office, having just finished with the last patient of the day. He began to tell us about his long journey in humanitarian work, and the experiences he has gathered along the way. The numerous placards and accolades in his office do not faze him; he seeks neither recognition nor fame in his quest to better the world in his own way. It was apparent throughout the interview that Dr Chow is a man of deep religious faith, committed to his cause of serving the underprivileged in the best way he can.

### History, mission, and other works of the HIS Foundation

The HIS Foundation was established in 1992 to offer a helping hand during times of natural disasters and

crises, eventually expanding to medical service trips, education work, and poverty reduction programmes. In addition to cleft lip and palate surgery, medical teams from ophthalmology, dentistry, orthopaedics, and internal medicine provide outreach services. The Foundation's education arm arranges summer camps, teacher training and basic health classes, while giving talented students a ticket out of poverty through scholarships in higher education. The HIS Foundation has been involved in the reconstruction of numerous schools and a hospital since 2002, improving lives in the regions they visit. As a Christian organisation, the Foundation relies on dedicated local Christian volunteers to perform selfless acts of kindness for people in different regions of the world.

### The journey to become a smile-maker

Dr Chow's path to medicine started with a book by Tom Dooley, a doctor who flew to remote corners of the world to assist those in need. Inspired by his humanitarian work in the dense jungles of Laos and Vietnam, Dr Chow chose to study medicine and graduated from The University of Hong Kong in 1975. He specialised in general surgery at the Queen Mary Hospital, until by chance he came across a seminar on plastic surgery. The seminar opened his eyes to the field of plastic surgery, a specialty of which

he knew little. The description of cleft lip surgeries and burn contractures intrigued him, sparking his interest in plastic surgery. It was an area where there was a very good prognosis for patients, unlike general surgery where long-term outcomes remained unfavourable. Making a positive change for patients that could last for many years seemed inherently attractive. As such, he was trained at the Princess Margaret Hospital in a plastic surgery subspecialty until 1988. Dr Chow rejects the misperception that plastic surgery is largely cosmetic; on the contrary, it plays a major role in treating congenital defects such as cleft lip and palate, hypospadias, and ptosis of the upper eyelids, accidental deformities following traffic or industrial accidents, and diseases such as skin cancers. Describing himself as someone who is eager for quick results, he felt plastic surgery suited him best.

Dr Chow saw how people with faith found inner peace, and he decided to embark on his own search for faith. He eventually found his religious calling in 1991, and committed to Christianity in May 1993. He asked his pastors to tell him of medical missions where he could offer a helping hand. His first mission was to Kenya in 1994 for 2 weeks, offering free surgical services. After returning to Hong Kong, a chance encounter with an old university friend led to his introduction to the HIS Foundation. Dr Chow was soon offering his services in Henan (河南省) through the Foundation where he was needed.

## Humanitarian work in China and other countries

When Dr Chow first went to mainland China in 1995 for his missions, he recalled the scenes of uneven development. Even the airport in the provincial capital of Henan, Zhengzhou, was rundown and lacking in facilities, with desolate surroundings. It was apparent early on in his visit that the rural-urban gap was large. Those in rural areas lacked access to basic medical facilities, infrastructure, and communication networks. He realised there was a need for his expertise by rural patients who had little access to surgical services, owing to both geographical and financial constraints. He started by providing a variety of surgical services and soon noticed that if he focused on one particular area of surgery, he could train local medical staff to perform certain procedures and thereby help more people. Dr Chow ultimately chose cleft lip and palate surgeries, since such surgeries could have a lasting impact on a patient's quality of life.

Although he started his work in Henan, Christian organisations soon referred patients to him from other regions of China. Since some had to travel many hours to reach the hospital, Dr Chow decided to travel to them instead, going to cities in Shandong (山東), Guangxi (廣西), and

Qinghai (青海). Demand for his services grew after news of successful operations reached other cities, prompting Dr Chow to organise four to six mission trips to China every year. He has also expanded his service overseas to Indonesia and Madagascar, where his skills were required.

## Overcoming challenges for the organisation

Dr Chow's humanitarian experience has not been a smooth ride. When he first started, there was a lack of trust between his team and the hospitals with which he worked. Dr Chow sought out hospitals that offered a place to perform surgery, but hospitals were often reluctant to place their trust in unknown doctors, as it would invite scrutiny should things go wrong. In addition, they sometimes lacked resources and personnel to assist Dr Chow in his work. With much effort and dedication, he and his team gradually established a working relationship with the hospitals and built up their capacity to handle more complex surgeries.

As the Foundation is a non-governmental organisation operating in mainland China, following local rules and laws have posed certain challenges. These regulations have at times restricted the ability of Dr Chow's team to deliver help. For instance, despite being a charitable organisation based on the Christian faith, it is prohibited from any form of preaching. Volunteers are instead encouraged to preach through their actions instead of words. It is important to satisfy local requirements in order to continue delivering much-needed help to those who require it.

Humanitarian work often demands personal sacrifices as well, where frequent service trips can affect family life and relationships. This makes the effort of Dr Chow and fellow volunteers all the more notable considering their unspoken personal sacrifices.

## Advice to doctors who are considering service trips

Many doctors choose this profession out of a desire to help people in need, so it is not surprising when doctors show an interest in service trips. Yet it is far from the only way to help people in need. For those who cannot leave Hong Kong for extended periods of time, for personal reasons or otherwise, Dr Chow says there is a lot of local charity work available. Many immigrants from mainland China have few possessions, do not have a social support network, and thus require people to care for them. Others who choose to trek long distances to Hong Kong for medical services not available in mainland China often need assistance as well. For medical professionals who cannot join service expeditions,

helping the underprivileged living in Hong Kong is well worth considering.

Before embarking on a service trip, Dr Chow emphasises the importance of understanding local cultures. The cultural practices in rural areas can be drastically different to those we are accustomed to in Hong Kong, and we must accommodate different beliefs while grasping their effects on health practices and treatment outcomes.

Most importantly, he hopes that future doctors will be able to find their own faith during their career. Dr Chow has personally benefited greatly from his faith, overcoming fears and difficulties during his career. Religion has played a major role in Dr Chow's life, pushing him to perform his work.

Dr Chow is a perfect example of how doctors can use their knowledge and skills to build a better world. We wish Dr Chow the best in his future work, and look forward to seeing him put more smiles on the faces of more people across the world.



(top) Dr Chow (far left) checking a cleft lip patient with his parents in the recovery room immediately after surgery in Indonesia in March 2015

(middle) Dr Chow and a local plastic surgeon trainee in Madagascar

(bottom) Dr Chow (far right) discussing the operation list with an Indonesian anaesthetist (far left)