



COMPASSION WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

Sixty healthcare heroes from 19 hospitals and institutions were recently honoured with the Healthcare Humanity Award (HHA) by President SR Nathan. They were recognised for their dedication, selflessness, and willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty. Three winners tell *Lifewise* why they love what they do, and the difference they've made to their patients' lives.





DR HUMPHREY PONG

VOLUNTEER PHYSICIAN

SINGAPORE CANCER SOCIETY HOSPICE HOME CARE UNIT

A COMFORT TO OTHERS

While 72 year-old Dr Humphrey Pong's pace of life has slowed down since he retired in 1999 after 35 years of service as a General Practitioner, it hasn't been a quiet ride into the sunset. The healthcare veteran makes it a point to honour the creed of his profession by setting aside at least two days every week to visit cancer patients at their homes.

At each home visit, Dr Pong checks on their condition and prescribes medication to address their pain; and he may conduct up to seven such visits a day. "These are patients who've completed their trial of treatments but have not beaten the disease," he explains. "It's our responsibility to visit them and lift their spirits, and do what we can to provide comfort."

Connecting with these patients has never been a problem for Dr Pong. After all, he himself was once a cancer patient. "Patients find it easier to open up to me after I tell them I was once a cancer sufferer too," he says. "Sometimes all they want is to talk to someone who understands."

He had a recurring ulcer on his tongue examined in September 2003 and it turned out to be cancerous. "I wasn't worried after I found out though. I've always taken things as they come, and this situation wasn't any different."

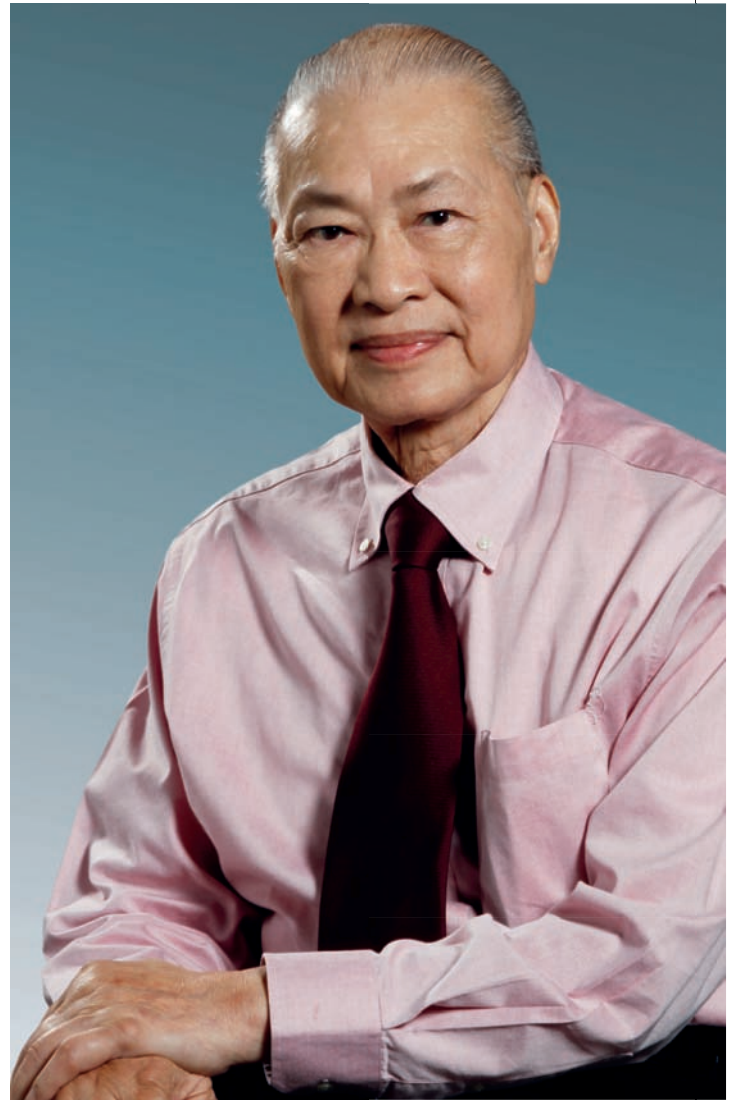
The prospect of not speaking or eating properly again did not faze him. Instead, his wife and three children were more concerned about his situation than he was. "They were worried, but I told them that the best thing to do for me was to pray," he says. "The point here is to not give up hope."

The operation a month later to get rid of the cancerous cells was successful — half of Dr Pong's tongue was removed, together with the glands on the left side of his neck. Such was his positive attitude that he surprised many with his speedy recovery. His speech therapist, whom he met three weeks after the operation, was shocked to discover that he'd already been chatting away for the past week. "When I met her, she said, "There's nothing more I can do for you!", he recalls.

The experience inspired Dr Pong to help others. He started volunteering at a National Kidney Foundation clinic, where he performed health screenings, until it closed in 2008. A year later, he volunteered with the Singapore Cancer Society and began doing what he does now.

Having spent the last two years with end-stage cancer patients, Dr Pong explains that it is not in him to judge how they choose to deal with their predicament. Instead, he takes pride in teaching his patients and their caregivers useful techniques such as how to apply and clean a dressing. And often, he's inspired by the strength and love they show.

"There was one family whose father was diagnosed with cancer," he recalls. "His children pulled me aside to ask me



not to reveal his condition to him. The wonderful thing is that when I went to examine him, he whispered to me not to tell his family that he had cancer. That truly is love within a family unit; not wanting either party to worry."

For his compassion and empathy, Dr Pong was recognised as one of this year's HHA recipients. "I was surprised, then humbled, when I found out that I was receiving the award," says the oldest HHA recipient this year. "I'll continue doing the best I can for my patients."

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DR JOSEPH LEONG
CONSULTANT PSYCHIATRIST
INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

REACHING OUT

Working at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), Dr Joseph Leong has dealt with many challenges. Ironically, it's not the patients he's had difficulty dealing with, but the stereotypes cast by the general public. "I've met people who think that psychiatrists can read minds, or are even a bit crazy themselves," says the married 38-year-old. "These perceptions come mostly from stigma associated with my profession which is all about treating people with mental illnesses. Our job is to create a safe and welcoming environment so that those suffering from emotional trauma are willing to open up and share their problems with us."



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Dr Leong's work goes beyond the walls of IMH as well. The mental healthcare veteran of 11 years is part of the management committee at the Singapore Association of Mental Health. He also teaches and trains counsellors, as well as caregivers, at the Hougang and Simei Care Centres.

"Volunteering my time gives me great opportunities to work with community partners, family members and persons with mental illness," says the father of three girls. "I'm also able to give support and training to these paraprofessional caregivers. The art of healing is much more than just dispensing medication and recovery is possible."

As an example of this art, he describes a patient he treated for drug addiction who didn't care about getting better, and only wanted to feed his cravings. "Instead of just addressing his condition, I asked him about his long-term goals," recalls Dr Leong. "He revealed that he loved his mother, and wanted to look after her. With that information, I convinced him that he could only do that if he went through the treatment and broke away from his addiction."

Dr Leong likens his preferred approach to the process of panning for gold. "It's like panning for gold to find the precious something. You have to dig through their problems and issues to find what they really care about," he says.

It might seem tedious for some, but Dr Leong thrives on the pressure. "I believe in good stress, especially from dealing with persons with severe mental illnesses," he explains. "In this job, when you open yourself up and connect with others, you share their pain and suffering. It makes you more humane and humble."

It's this dedication to his work and patients that earned him the Healthcare Humanity Award this year. The accolade was created originally in 2003 to recognise healthcare workers who fought the deadly Sars virus, and upon being told of his win, Dr Leong says he was reminded of his ex-colleague Dr Alex Chao, who died from the disease that same year. "I am humbled and touched by this award, as I'm reminded of how he gave his life fighting the disease."

"It's a bittersweet win in that sense, but it also helps affirm why I went into medicine — because it's a calling, and not a business or money-making venture. The journey can be quite an adventure, with many things and people to learn from." ❖



JASMINE KANG

**ADVANCED PRACTICE NURSE
TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL**

CARING FOR THE ELDERLY

There are Nurse Managers and Nurse Educators, and then there's Jasmine Kang, an Advanced Practice Nurse (APN), the only Geriatric APN in Singapore. Having been a nurse at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) for 12 years, Jasmine describes her choice to go into this field as 'a calling'. "I'm passionate about helping people," says the 31-year-old who is single.

She explains that APNs have advanced clinical skills and knowledge as compared to a typical nurse; and only nurses with a Masters degree in Nursing are qualified for this role. Though they bridge the gap between doctors and nurses, APNs are not qualified to prescribe medication.



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HOMES OR AT HOME.**

Much of Jasmine's job involves examining and diagnosing patients, and conducting simple investigations into their cases. Her day work is from 9am to 5.30pm and includes home visits to frail elderly patients who have recently been discharged.

"What we're providing is transitional care; making sure they're coping well at home," Jasmine explains. "How often we visit as well as the treatment they receive depends on the type and severity of their condition. This can range from checking on broken bones that are healing to treating newly developed symptoms like a fever."

Besides providing medical care for patients, Jasmine adds that she also teaches caregivers the signs and symptoms of potential medical problems to look out for, as well as how to change dressings and clean up after a patient.

While Jasmine might be the country's only Geriatric APN for now, she looks forward to having more colleagues. "I know of a number of juniors who'll be graduating soon, so I'm not worried about being alone much longer," she says with a laugh. "With a growing aging population, it's important to have more people in the field who are specialised in the treatment and care of the elderly whether in hospitals, nursing homes or at home."

It was eight years ago that Jasmine made the decision to specialise in gerontology — study of the social, psychological and biological aspects of aging. "I got to work with doctors from different disciplines when I first started at TTSH, but I enjoyed what the geriatricians did the most," she recalls.

"They are more holistic and thorough in their care and management of patients, examining them from top to bottom. This is because in the case of the elderly, how they react to an injury is different from those who are younger."

Jasmine cites an example of a patient suffering from dementia and explains that elderly patients can have pain receptors that do not function properly — i.e. some elderly patients might be very vocal about small cuts or bruises, but they might not even feel the effects of a broken bone.

“If you do not find out beforehand that the patient has dementia, the severity of her pain and injury might be diagnosed wrongly,” she adds.

As with other patients, dealing with the elderly comes with its share of challenges. Jasmine highlights that communicating with the elderly in different dialects can be challenging for her. “I can speak Hokkien and Teochew, but some Chinese patients only know how to converse in Cantonese and Hakka,” she says. “So I use gestures to show what I’m trying to do for them. It requires some patience because they don’t get the meaning straight away, but when they come to understand that you’re sincerely trying to help them, handling them becomes easier.”

For all these challenges, Jasmine has no complaints. She describes her patients as a joy to look after as they have much

wisdom and experience to share. “I remember one elderly Peranakan lady,” she recalls. “She had broken her hip, but was restless and didn’t want to remain in her wheelchair. In order to calm her down, I sat next to her and chatted with her, asking her about her life. She relaxed after she started talking. She told me that she had been a cook. At the end of our 30-minute talk, she stopped wanting to get up from her wheelchair.”

Jasmine’s patience and care was recognised earlier this year when she received the Healthcare Humanity Award. “It’s an affirmation of my passion for nursing, and [my wanting to] reach out to help others who are less fortunate than me,” she says. “I’m honoured to have received the award, but being able to make my patients smile, to sometimes cure, to often treat, and to always comfort is as great a reward.” +

HEALTHCARE HUMANITY AWARD WINNERS 2011 FROM NATIONAL HEALTHCARE GROUP

	NAME	DESIGNATION	ORGANISATION
1	CHAN LAY LIN	PRINCIPAL MEDICAL SOCIAL WORKER	INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH
2	DR LEONG JERN-YI, JOSEPH	CONSULTANT	INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH
3	FARIZAN BTE MOHAMED	PATIENT SERVICE ASSISTANT	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
4	GAYTARI DEVI D/O RAM LAKHAN RAM	STAFF NURSE	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
5	HO MIEW LING	NURSE EDUCATOR	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
6	DR HUM YIN MEI, ALLYN	CONSULTANT	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
7	KANG SIN EE, JASMINE	NURSE CLINICIAN – ADVANCED PRACTICE NURSE (GERIATRICS)	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
8	DR KOH YONG HWANG, MERVYN	CONSULTANT	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
9	LEE KONG LENG, CHRISTOPHER	SENIOR NURSE CLINICIAN	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
10	MOHAMMAD NIZAM BIN URIP	SENIOR STAFF NURSE	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
11	DR PEK CHERN KUOK, DON	REGISTRAR	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
12	DR RUPESH AGRAWAL	ASSOCIATE CONSULTANT	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
13	TAN MANRU	STAFF NURSE	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
14	TNG TINA, VERONIQUE	NURSING CLINICIAN	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL
15	WANG XIAONA	SENIOR STAFF NURSE	TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL