

# The Heart of a Volunteer

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

If I may speak frankly – I feel very unworthy of writing this article. I haven't participated in any humanitarian aid efforts, and have only just begun setting aside personal free time to help with a few local charitable causes. Nothing compared to what some of our colleagues have done and/or are still doing!

Organisations like Doctors Without Borders (*or Medecins sans Frontieres, MSF*) and the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) are gaining prominence, and doctors here – ranging from medical officers to those with decades of experience behind them – are becoming increasingly active in altruistic projects.

***You must give some time to your fellow men. Even if it's a little thing, do something for others – something for which you get no pay but the privilege of doing it. (Albert Schweitzer, 1875 – 1965)***

One of the best things about being a volunteer is that everybody qualifies. The only obstacle is taking that first step and committing yourself. The life of a young Singaporean doctor doesn't always afford opportunities for charity work – manpower shortage is still an issue, so leave is hard to come by; not to mention all the exams we have to clear, as well as responsibilities to our own families.

However, over the years, I've met doctors who managed to overcome all of the above in order to secure the time they need. One even put her career on hold and lived in Third World countries for a few years.

***Give what you have. To someone, it may be better than you dare to think. (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1807 – 1882)***

Doctors are valuable assets mainly because they possess specialised, life-saving skills. Surgeons can repair cleft palates in a rural village with only minimal, basic equipment. Those with training in disaster medicine can operate makeshift field hospitals in developing countries hit by devastating earthquakes and floods.

However, no contribution, no matter how small, ever goes unappreciated. Adrenaline rushes and exotic locations may not be everyone's cup of tea, so a substantial number of local doctors help out in other ways – doing ward rounds or running clinics in nursing homes free-of-charge, or volunteering in Club Rainbow and children's cancer foundations. One ER physician has even branched out by helping a rural community in a neighbouring country set up vital infrastructure.

The following article illustrates the vast possibilities available to us, and I found it to be immensely inspiring and heartwarming. Volunteer doctors come from different backgrounds, with different areas of specialty, yet share a common love for helping the less fortunate, sometimes at great risk to their own health and safety. One of them contracted typhoid fever, while another regularly enters a nation torn apart by war and political turmoil to perform life-changing operations.

***Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear. (Mark Twain, 1835 – 1910)***

Many others who join the MSF and SIF also demonstrated nerves of steel. I still have vivid memories of an account from a fellow doctor who went to Gujarat just after the massive earthquake hit, braving aftershocks and civil unrest as he joined fellow volunteers in helping the injured and homeless. Most already knew the risks involved before they embarked on the journey, but soldiered on despite the inherent fear of what lay ahead. In an era where many Singaporeans prefer the comforts and security of home, I am awed by the amazing grit shown by our colleagues.

***I expect to pass through this world but once; any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now; let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again. (Etienne De Grellet, 1773 – 1855)***

Volunteering requires motivation, and motivation can only be sustained by passion. And speaking from personal experience, I've found that the best of intentions and a compassionate spirit, surprisingly, often fail to overcome one's inertia. Finding your passion may take time, but once you discover it, everything will fall into place. I believe that all doctors treasure the inherent nobility of the medical profession, and yearn to do their part for charity. Let the following stories motivate you, then search for a cause you can be passionate about. *"Be charitable before wealth*

*makes thee covetous."*

(Sir Thomas Browne)

But most importantly, always remember that *"We can't do much about the length of our lives, but we can do plenty with its width and depth."*

(Evan Escar) ■

