

# The First Hundred Days

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member



I was in the second month of my housemanship when my grandmother passed away of acute congestive cardiac failure. It was devastating for me as I had been closer to my granny than I was my parents. In addition to the stress of the first houseman posting was a dilemma presented to me and my wife-to-be. We were just getting ready to consider marriage when we were told by our family that we had to either get wedded within the next hundred days after my granny's demise or wait out three years. It was tempting to yield to the former as we were so in love. After much deliberation, we opted to wait as we realised that marriage is too important to be rushed into. I was angry but we belong to traditional Chinese families. There was to be no compromise on this matter as a breach of the custom implied serious bad fortune to the transgressors. Our parents were not about to risk both their first-borns' future.

I had almost forgotten about this hundred days myth till recently when the mother of one of my clinic staff lost her husband. Mourning the loss of a spouse is unfathomably hard. We know some individuals face immense suffering but do better than others. This lady was known to me as one of great inner strength. She had always been quietly confident and independent. Although it was going to be tough in the bereavement period, I was surprised to see her when she turned up at the clinic to seek help.

After some superficial exchange and initial awkwardness, I decided to plunge straight into the heart of the matter.

"How are you, really?"

"Not so good."

"Been crying a lot, huh?"

"Yes. I guess it's to be expected. I try to sleep but many things keep flashing through my mind at night."

"Are you eating ok?"

"I force myself to eat. I tell myself I have to be strong. But... (tears rolled down her cheeks) ...if not for the fact that my children are not yet married, I don't think I want to carry on living."

"You must miss him a lot."

"The really hard thing for me is that my husband has always taken our marriage for granted until the last three

years. For so long I had to endure his neglect of the family when he spent more time with his colleagues than his wife and kids. Something caused him to change three years ago and I got back the husband I had fallen in love with many years ago. With the kids now working, we spent much time by ourselves, doing things that we truly enjoyed. Just when I was finally enjoying my marriage, he had to leave me!"

"It helps that you talk with your family members and your friends. Try not to be isolated."

"I think the same too. My children work long hours and are so exhausted when they get home late at night."

"How about your own siblings and close friends?"

"They were all around and consoling during the funeral wake. Soon after, the phone calls decreased in frequency and nobody actually dropped in to visit. None offer to ask me out or over to their homes. I know it is bad luck to associate with the widow but it hurts to know that my own family and friends care more about superstition at a time when I need them most."

The disappointment and bitterness were palpable.

There are many things Chinese that I am proud of but this is one of the worst practices that ought to be changed. Nobody has adequately explained the basis of the hundred days but the compliance of this superstition must have caused much unnecessary agony.

Another bad practice among the Chinese was taught to me by my late beloved grandmother. I recall an incident in my childhood when I had accompanied her to the wet market. As the floor was slippery, she lost her footing and fell heavily on her bottom. Even before I had a chance to reach out my hand to assist her, she gave me a stern look and strict order not to touch her. I was to stand aside and allow her to get up herself. To my astonishment, none of the people who had witnessed the fall came forward to help this poor old lady. Later at home, she realised how confused I was and took time to explain that it was (still is) a Chinese belief that bad luck will pass over to whosoever helped an old person who had fallen. She said it matter-of-factly with no logical explanation.

Not too long ago, a seventy-plus-year-old patient of mine came to see me for severe haematomas of the face



#### About the author:

Dr Tan Poh Kiang (MBBS, 1990) is a family physician who practices in a public housing estate in the heartland of Singapore. He is privileged to practise the art of healing and enjoys writing in his free time. He can be contacted at email: liejoan@singnet.com.sg.

◀ Page 12 – *The First Hundred Days*

and limbs due to a bad fall. As he had a dense hemiplegia from a stroke years ago, he had to struggle for close to half an hour to get back on his feet and make his way to my clinic with his quad-stick. I was saddened that no one volunteered to help this poor soul. But he corrected me. He told me that there were indeed several kind young men in the vicinity who were quick to respond but he stopped them. He confessed that even though he badly needed physical support, his conscience would not allow him to risk transferring bad luck to these innocent young people.

---

*There are many things Chinese that I am proud of but this is one of the worst practices that ought to be changed. Nobody has adequately explained the basis of the hundred days but the compliance of this superstition must have caused much unnecessary agony.*

---

The last lesson was also learned at the feet of my late granny. When I was in fourth year medical school, I woke up one morning from the frantic knocks on my bedroom door. It was my sister who was panicking because she saw granny gasping and foaming at the mouth. When I went over, she had already turned blue and keeled over. Fortunately I had enough composure to perform CPR till the ambulance arrived. It turned out that she had suffered acute congestive cardiac failure from uncontrolled hypertension. She spent the next week in CCU (Cardiac Care Unit) and another week in the general ward before going home. For an old person to be critically ill and immobilised for a period of time was devastating to her

frail body. When she was discharged, she had to return home in a wheelchair.

To the feeble-minded, the wheelchair might have turned out to be a permanent state. But not my granny who was absolutely “pai-sey” (dialect for ashamed or embarrassed) about being seen as an invalid in a wheelchair. She announced the day she had returned home that she was not going out of the house till she could walk. Without any physiotherapist’s service, my granny rehabilitated herself through the progressive help of the walking frame, quad-stick and finally an umbrella. Three months later, we were able to bring her out for a dinner at a Teochew restaurant where she walked proudly on her own, with the unobtrusive aid of a glamorous-looking umbrella.

This anecdote has a positive tone but the same “pai-sey” attitude regarding walking aids has caused many unnecessary falls among my elderly patients. When they ought to be using a broader base walking aid like a walking frame or a quad stick, they had opted for the umbrella that was inadequate to compensate for their physical weakness or imbalance. Often times, I had to plead with these old folks and appeal to what I hope is some degree of common sense to adopt good practices for fall prevention.

I have learned that the best of medical science and technology have to meet and deal with the worst of community myths and traditional beliefs. When a grieving person is at the most risk of depression and suicide, he/she is left on her own. When a fallen person is most vulnerable and needs physical assistance, he/she is untouchable. When a physically feeble person needs to be supported by aids, he/she is more concerned about pride and “face”. These and other tales have taught me that one’s awareness of such background customs and beliefs can help one to anticipate potential hazards and plan for other compensatory measures to help those who suffer. I am not optimistic that such practices are going to change any time soon. It is therefore imperative for me to share this so that other practitioners can benefit from this knowledge. ■