

Dr Wong Ting Hway

is a registrar in the Department of General Surgery, Singapore General Hospital. She used to work for Medecins sans Frontieres (Doctors without Borders) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). When not putting her hands into patients' bellies, she belly-dances and writes poetry. She can be contacted at wong.th@doctors.net.uk

The Humanitarian Journey



One of the most touching memories I have as a practising doctor is...

I do not know if you count this as an experience as a “practising doctor”.

When I worked in Angola with Medecins sans Frontieres, the World Food Programme (WFP) gave out food rations once a month. It was chaos when it happened, with all the needy people lining up with their precious food ration cards in hand, and their children clutching their clothes. Occasionally, in the confusion of the crowds and having too many things to watch over at the same time (children plus bags of maize), thugs would run in and snatch the bags of maize and the family queuing up was left without their food ration for the entire month. Sometimes, if you walked past late in the day, you could still see the mothers, despondent and crying, hoping to get some leftover half packet if they waited long enough and if the workers believed their story about being robbed.

Whenever we knew it was WFP food ration day, we avoided the roads that led to the distribution site.

One day, I was walking between the hospital and the feeding centre, when I saw a trail of golden yellow powder mixed in with the pale orange dust of the road. I soon realised that it was from a small hole in the WFP ration bag from a mother walking in front of me. By the

time I saw this, the guard from the feeding centre had pointed out the leakage to her, and she had set down on the ground her bag of maize and her kid (both of which had been balanced on her body, on head and back respectively). She was stooping over, scraping the grains of yellow powder from the pale orange dust of the road, trying to scoop it with her hands back into the bag, dusting off the orange bits from the road, while the feeding centre guard said sympathetically to her, “*Deixa-o, deixa-o* (leave it, leave it).”



Chissindo camp for displaced persons, Kuito, Angola.



Former town hall, Kuito Angola. The holes were from the multiple sieges that the town went through. The banner reads: “Youth Festival 2001 Symbol of Unity” (this was at the height of the civil war).

She did give up in the end, looked sadly at the metre-long thin trail of golden dust behind her, put her child back on her back, balancing the sack of maize with the hole facing upwards awkwardly on her head, and carried on walking.

The most memorable thing I can remember as a practising doctor is ...

This also happened in Angola.

I was doing rounds at the therapeutic feeding centre, checking on the children with bad infections or dehydration, when I saw Rosemarie,

a surgeon from Columbia, rushing towards me.

“Ting Hway, how good is your obstetrics?”

Well, it had been a while since I delivered a baby in medical school.

Our Norwegian midwife was on holiday that weekend. I followed Rosemarie to the labour room. There, a woman had arrived after walking hours to reach hospital, in labour for the eleventh time. She was lying on the bench, eyes glazed over, a baby’s head sticking out of her vagina, two large Angolan midwives pumping up and down her abdomen, the way you would expect when we are doing CPR.

“We need some assisted delivery device. I can’t get a proper grip with the forceps.”

Rosemarie and I were given a box. “*E a Ventusa* (this is the Ventouse).”

Rosemarie took out the suction cup, which screwed onto a contraption that looked like a bicycle pump. She handed the bicycle pump to me then used both her hands to apply the suction cup onto the baby’s head. For what seemed like an eternity, I pumped the bicycle pump as fast as I could, the midwives continued pushing up and down on the patient’s abdomen, while Rosemarie pulled on the suction cup.

Suddenly, I felt a give, and the baby slipped out straight into the cloth held out by the third midwife. The baby promptly gave a yelp, the mother suddenly lost her glassy-eyed look and leaned forward towards her baby, the two midwives who had been performing CPR on her tummy collapsed backward, exhausted, Rosemarie let go of the rubber cup, and I put down my bicycle pump.

The most unexpected thing a patient’s relative ever said to me ...

Before I returned to training in surgery, I worked for HCA (hospice home care). One day, long after I left HCA, someone familiar-looking came up to me in the street and said, “Dr Wong! How are you? Thank you so much for what you did for my father, Mr X.”

I tried to remember who Mr X was, the name sounded familiar, and I recognised the patient’s relative, who seemed so happy to see me, and so I tried to get clues as to who the Mr X was.

“Any problems?”

“No, and thank you for everything!”

Me, still clueless, “And when are we seeing him again?”



Orphanage classroom, Mae Sot, Thai-Burmese border, Dr Cynthia's Clinic, 1998.



With my host, Pema Dolkar, a Tibetan refugee, at Pokhara, Nepal. She was 15 and was supporting her family of six (her father was ill with TB) by selling jewellery to tourists.

Patient's relative, starting to laugh, "Dr Wong, I hope it will be a very long time before you see him, he has gone on to a better place, you took care of him under HCA, thanks to you and your team, he went peacefully in his sleep last year!"

What keeps you going?

Watching the sun rise or the sun set. I like periods of transition, watching the colours move, wondering if the sun will really go that direction, even though you know it will.

Did you draw inspiration from anyone when you went into humanitarian work?

One of my heroes is Dr Ang Swee Chai, a surgeon who worked in the Middle East during the war. She says that surgery is "cooking and sewing", and therefore suited for a woman!

I read Dr Ang Swee Chai's book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, shortly before I started my first solo humanitarian trip to the Middle East. But countless other people and stories have inspired me too.

My greatest extravagance is ...

Books! They take up so much physical space, but give so much mental pleasure.

My favourite book/author is ...

Amos Oz. Author of *Black Box*, *To Know A Woman*, *The Same Sea*, and his latest, an autobiography, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*.

In medical school, I once skipped a lecture to listen to him speak. He had been invited by the Department of Oriental Studies in Cambridge. He was a charismatic speaker, talking about his writing, life in Israel, and of course, politics. He said that the modern Hebrew language was born the first time an Ashkenazi (Jewish of European descent) boy said to a Sephardim (Jewish of Middle Eastern descent) girl, "I love you." He also



Mae Tao Clinic 2005 – In 1998, when I first visited, the clinic was made up of bamboo buildings, similar to the orphanage classroom in Mae Sot.

said that the best antidote to extremism is a sense of humour!

Towards the end of his talk, which was supposed to be only an hour, but had gone overtime, I had to leave to attend a lab practical. I got up regretfully to go. I glanced at him as I left from the back door of the theatre. As I opened the door, Amos Oz was taking a question. Between us were all the rows of lecture tables and benches, the rapt audience scattered around the hall. He looked me in the eye, smiled and gave a little wave. I regret to say that I cannot remember now what the lab practical was about.

My biggest food weakness is ...

I like to eat everything (almost). Probably the most adventurous food I have had were the ants and grubs that my guide in the Amazon jungle showed us as edible and asked us to eat (they were crawling on the nest and on the trees and he just reached out to pick one up to put in his mouth).

I would like to be remembered as ...

Aiyah, no need to remember *lah!* ■