

By Dr Darryl Lim



Camp Rainbow is a highpoint of the year for many children.

No Rest for the Weary at Camp Rainbow

“**D**octor, doctor ... I think she’s having a fit!”

I glanced at my watch. It was 2 am and I had crawled into bed barely an hour ago, having only just settled that hypoglycemic kid! But duty calls.

I grabbed her medical docket and familiarised myself with her medical history. Rushing over to review her, I confirmed she was having a seizure and ran through her ABC’s. I inserted an IV cannula and administered a dose of diazepam. Fortunately, the fit was aborted easily and all was well again. Or rather, all was well for the moment.

A regular day in the emergency department? Or just another night duty in the paediatric wards?

Welcome to Camp Rainbow! Where it is a sunny day – everyday – for the kids in the camp. On the other hand, the Camp Rainbow volunteers, including my team of doctors and nurses, have been working behind the scenes, sometimes round the clock, to keep the camp running smoothly and safely. The work is tough and the hours worse than a regular day at the hospital. We were on duty 24/7 for three consecutive days, Friday through

Sunday, staying overnight with the kids, ever watchful for any medical emergencies that may suddenly occur. We were tired, exhausted and sleep-deprived but ironically, we had never been happier!

So what is Camp Rainbow? Is it boot camp to torture young, recently graduated house officers? What with the unearthly hours and ‘superhuman’ stamina required to endure the entire duration of camp, there are times when some do wonder. But no! That could not be further from the truth! Camp Rainbow is a residential adventure camp for children afflicted with chronic illnesses, some life-threatening. Held annually during the June school holidays, this medically-supervised camp is organised by a dedicated group of volunteers. For a time, the name was changed to Camp Sunshine, when children from other charities had been invited to attend.

It all began in 1991, when the inaugural Camp Rainbow was launched with just a bunch of volunteers and 44 children participating. Over the last 15 years, the success of the camp, together with the overwhelming enthusiasm and support of beneficiaries, families, volunteers



Dr Darryl Lim, a Medical Director of Club Rainbow (Singapore), is also a paediatrician at Children’s Emergency in KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital. He first volunteered as a group doctor for the camp in 2002. Little did he know that would lay the groundwork for him to assume the portfolio as the camp’s Medical Director for two years running, in 2005 and 2006. He has handed over the baton to the next eager and capable Medical Director for 2007 but will return as a group doctor as Camp Rainbow will always remain close to his heart.

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and sponsors, has led to it becoming an annual event, attended sometimes by over a hundred kids. The beneficiaries from Club Rainbow comprise the main bulk of the campers. These kids have a myriad of chronic illnesses. We have kids with complex congenital cyanotic heart disease whose oxygen saturation hovers around the eighties; we have wheelchair-bound children who need intermittent urinary catheterisation round the clock; we have kids with epilepsy (as you have read earlier) who despite adherence to their medication, still can have a fit anytime.



All activities have to be approved by the camp's medical team.

Our job? To ensure that these little ones, who already have to plough through their everyday life burdened with their illnesses, have a fulfilling and enriching time at the camp, participating in outdoor activities and yet doing so in a safe and medically-supervised environment. From the time the camp committee meets and plans the activities, the medical directors either veto any potentially unsafe activities or give the go-ahead for activities deemed appropriate for

the kids. Even the diet is reviewed as some kids have dietary restrictions due to their medical conditions.

The organisation of this annual camp is a mammoth undertaking, with planning beginning half a year in advance. Volunteers come from all walks of life, most of whom hold full-time jobs, but are willing to sacrifice their precious free time for the kids. Amongst the volunteers is our team of dedicated doctors and nurses, one pair allocated to each group in the camp, as well as two medical directors and a pair of nurses in charge of medical logistics. Together, we help to coordinate the medical team's efforts, coming aboard from the very start. We follow the kids through the various programmes throughout the camp. Ambulances are also on 24-hour standby at the camp, ready to evacuate the children to hospital in the middle of the night, if need be. The medical evacuation plans and routes have all been mapped out with ambulance drivers all pre-familiarised.

One day prior to the start of Camp Rainbow, we will prepare a sick bay at the campsite. This temporary medical cell will house a variety of medical stores, from simple bandages and dressings to patch up the many minor scrapes and bruises that might be sustained during the camp, to the necessary drugs and equipment for a full blown resuscitation. When we move out 'into the field', such as when we went to Sentosa for our version of the 'Amazing Race' in 2005, the medical cell becomes mobile, operating out of the two ambulances accompanying the kids.

We have the medical history of every child in our medical docket, courtesy of their primary physicians who will complete a medical form and certify them fit prior to Camp Rainbow.



The medical team for last year's camp.

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This close relationship between the children's primary doctors and the medical directors is essential to safeguard their well-being at the camp and to manage any acute deterioration in their medical conditions. Each group doctor or nurse keeps an Inpatient Medical Record (our beloved 'IMR') of each child's medical condition and medication is served (and documented) at the appropriate times, just like in the wards. As you can expect, there are the usual battles between the kids and the nurses serving their medication. Some mistakenly think that without their parents around, it is an opportunity for a 'holiday' from their daily medication and so many a time, we have had to wheedle them into happily taking it without forcing them to. After all, this is Camp Rainbow and we are not here to torture them!

We also bunk in together with the groups and are on call round-the-clock. This close proximity allows a quick reaction time in any medical emergency.

Some might wonder if all this preparation is overkill, but we just have to reflect back on our fair share of emergencies, from the hypoglycemic diabetics, to wheezing asthmatics with acute exacerbation and dehydrated kids requiring intravenous rehydration. Yes, we have truly never regretted lugging around all the medical equipment every year! But more importantly, as parents are not staying with their kids in camp, they have entrusted their care to us. Should any emergency arise, the parents will of course be notified, but during those three days, for some parents at least, they will get some worry-free respite from caring for their kids round the clock, knowing that we will be on the job, safeguarding their precious ones.

For me, it all began as a group doctor some years back, where I got my 'feet wet' running around with the kids in their groups. To them, we were no longer "that doctor who always sticks me with a needle", but we became their big brothers and sisters, that "ko-ko" or "che-che" who helped tie their shoelaces or fed them lunch. And on our part, to some doctors, these kids were no longer just "that Thal kid" or "this blue baby". With such a close, hands-on care of our patients during camp, we were privileged to have been an integral part of their lives, in a way that was just not



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possible within the sterility of the hospital wards or clinics. Eating, sleeping and literally sticking to them like glue, I feel we have gotten some insight into the daily struggles of each child and how they truly appreciate the simple pleasures of life that many others take for granted. And we do try to bring some normality into the lives of the kids. Watching them run around at camp, laugh and just enjoy the simple joys of childhood, forgetting for those few days, the battles that each child wages with his or her illness, it makes all the hard work and the many late camp meetings a worthwhile effort. And truth be told, many a parent has shared with me that Camp Rainbow is *the* high-point of every year, something that their child looks forward to in June.

Just the very mention of "Camp Rainbow", to all my friends whom I have made during the past few camps, both volunteers and kids, invokes strong memories. For some, it was a chance to be 'normal', for others, it was an opportunity to do fun things they cannot usually do in their school camps. For me, I will always remember my young friend with spastic diplegia, who normally has difficulty walking, struggling to clamber up that rock wall. From where we stood below, it was not even half-way to the top, but for her, she was on top of the world!

So why do we punish ourselves every year, with the three days of rigorous activity during camp, working harder than a regular night duty and without pay even? Well, just for the simple reason of seeing a smile on every one of these kids' faces! ■

**Camp Rainbow 2007 will be held in early June. We still need volunteer doctors and nurses. If you would like to sign up, please email Dr Lim at darryl_lim@yahoo.com
The work will be hard, the hours long but the experience unforgettable!**