



In Memory of Prof Cynthia Goh (1949–2022):

Whispers of a Mentor

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Most of us know Prof Cynthia Goh as a visionary, a trailblazer and an educator. As a founding member of the hospice movement in Singapore, the Asia Pacific Hospice Palliative Care Network and the Worldwide Palliative Care Alliance, she was the ever-present face of palliative care in Singapore.

For many of us, Prof Goh was all these things and much more – a mentor, a teacher and a friend. In her passing, those of us to whom she gave selflessly lost a motherly guide and trusted confidante. Reliably on hand with just the right advice to help us navigate the changing tides of our lives, she guided us calmly, kindly and compassionately, often reflecting on her own experiences and insights over a cup of tea or lunch. In her soft dignified manner, she would listen, unravel gnarly brows and share just the right thing we needed. She sat with my wife and I in our loss, when my father died and when my youngest son was in the special care unit. She was there when I married, when my sons were born, and when I completed my

studies. And through all these times – she taught me as she had done for so many of us in the team.

I am reminded that, “If all we are, are memories, connections and emotions in the hearts we have touched”, sharing some of our personal stories will help keep what is dearest to us alive. In the best traditions of Boss’ ethos – we gain when we give, and we learn when we teach. Shared by all in the team, these are some of our dearest memories and lessons from Prof Goh.

On patient care...

We are not tasked with taking care of a disease but caring for a person replete with needs, connections, loves and aspirations. We have lost the plot if we focus solely on the signs or symptoms and forget the person before us.

On communication...

We may be an expert physician and care provider, but in the end, patients remember how we make them feel.

Provide them with a safe space to talk, and then listen. We learn as much about ourselves as we do about them.

On failure...

Prof Goh often said that failure and obstacles should be met with a mixture of humility and perseverance. These experiences are as much our teachers as any of our more positive experiences. They are to be embraced as much as any success, reflected upon and learnt from. In the end, she reminded us that “we are not defined by our failures but by how we rise.”

On growth...

Guiding a physician who was facing obstacles in his career, Prof Goh reminded him that perseverance should be accompanied by self-awareness. Fulfilment does not only come in achieving a goal, but in the journey of development. Importantly, we should not sacrifice our values or principles. “Success is

about getting *where* you are without compromising *who* you are”.

On interpersonal conflict...

Supporting a colleague who was dealing with a difficult junior, Prof Goh advised, “Don’t lash out. When you do, you only hurt yourself. Look into what truths there are and why they are saying what they say – and learn.”

On self-compassion...

Although we aim to be the best version of ourselves, we will stumble. Embrace these failings with humility, admit our shortcomings and make amends. Most of all, we should acknowledge our foibles as part of what makes us who we are and be kind to ourselves.

On work-life balance...

Acknowledging the demands on physicians, we should aim to balance sacrifices without losing sight of the relationships that matter to us. Though often ignoring her own advice, Prof Goh always reminded us that time with our families will pass by in the blink of an eye, and we should not miss these precious moments.

On career...

Always do what makes us feel enthused and, better still, makes us a better version of ourselves.

On taking the time...

It seems we often forget to take time to tell people how much they matter to us until it is too late. Why wait? It is in these moments that life’s meaning is clearest.

On loss...

“In every life, some rain must fall.” Prof Goh reflected on her losses and believed such experiences could teach us something. But more so, these experiences, if shared, could help another. Was this not our essence – to be of service, to help one another? To bear witness to suffering, to hear the pain, to give freely of ourselves, to be there for our patients, their families, our friends?

On personhood...

Echoing the saying, “We are not defined by wealth and achievements but by the hearts we touch,” Prof Goh stressed that our true value comes from how we treat the less fortunate, and from how we give of ourselves, with genuine interest and affection.

On joy...

Joy is to be shared... to lift those around us. These moments are fleeting, all too often gone before we know it. Prof Goh reminded us to be present and mindful of such moments.

On random acts of kindness...

Try it!

Prof Goh touched our hearts in countless ways. She encouraged us to talk about the darkest fears haunting us and the wildest dreams towards which we aspired. Perhaps what Prof Goh embodied – as a role model, advisor and mentor – is best encapsulated in Shakespeare’s description of a friend: “... one that knows you as you are, understands where you have been, accepts what you have become, and still, gently allows you to grow.”

To my family at the Division of Supportive and Palliative Care, in this sharing I am reminded of one of the last lessons Prof Goh shared – cherish the friendships we have built and this team we call family. In our loss, it is to each other that we must turn to and continue the work Prof Goh started. ♦



Our palliative care family