

Mr and Mrs Jack Sprat



Text by Dr Tan Su-Ming

Dr Tan Su-Ming graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1990. She is married with a daughter and runs her own general practice.



I loved this couple.

I said "love" in past tense because Mrs Sprat is no more. Of course, Sprat is not their real name.

I thought of the nursery rhyme line: "Jack Sprat could eat no fat, His wife could eat no lean", the first time they walked into my consultation room in 2002.

What struck me was the great difference in their sizes.

Mr Sprat was very lean and Mrs Sprat was a whale; and I say that with no disrespect intended, but with affection.

She weighed in at 131 kg. For her petite height, she should have ideally been less than 55 kg.

They were a loving pair. Mrs Sprat had the most beautiful serene face and Mr Sprat the most adoring one. Not surprisingly, Mrs Sprat had a whole host of metabolic conditions: diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol and bad knees, but she was always ever cheerful.

And so my heart fell when Mr Sprat came by recently after a brief absence to say that his wife had passed on a month ago.

"Oh, what of?" I asked, taking deep breaths (a trick I learnt that will stop me from crying).

I thought he would tell me it was a stroke or a heart attack, but he said, "flesh-eating bacteria". He wasn't able to give me more details except that she fought for her life for a month in the intensive care unit.

I searched his face and only saw stoicism.

The room seemed so big now, without his other half to fill all that space she used to – with her largeness and her lovely spirit. ♦

Can You Say What You Feel?



Yesterday, a woman from the Philippines brought her 70-year-old mother (Mrs P) to see me. She had suffered a stroke 30 years ago that left her with aphasia – the inability to use language. There are many types of aphasia, but hers was expressive aphasia, where she could understand what was spoken, but was unable to express herself. Her family had to help her by guessing what she meant to say at times.

Throughout the consult, Mrs P was able to follow the conversation between her daughter and me, nodding or shaking her head appropriately and laughing at times when I was (intentionally) amusing. Finally, when the consult was over and she was about to get up from

her chair, she struggled to say something. Her brow was slightly furrowed. The words would not come. She then used the index finger of her good hand (her right arm had been weakened by her stroke) to try and "write" out the word she wanted to say on my table top but failed.

Suddenly she looked up, as if the word had finally come to her, and she beamed and blurted out, "thank you!"

It took all of us by surprise as she laughed, as if pleased with herself.

"That was a very heartfelt thanks, doc," her daughter said to me.

I was very moved. That, made my week. ♦