

Auter Vincit Omnia

Love Conquers All

How that Led Me to Be a GP

Text and photos by Dr Tan Tze Lee

1989. We met.

We married at the end of 1990. I was a medical resident at the National University Hospital (NUH), and L was a paediatric resident in the paediatric department downstairs. We both really enjoyed working in our respective departments, and the daily cut and thrust of acute medicine and paediatrics was very exciting. In those early days, the duties were onerous but were often made bearable by the sheer quality of the colleagues we worked with. In medicine, I had the privilege of working under many eminent clinicians including Prof Chia Boon Lock, Prof Vernon Oh and Prof Lee Kok Onn, just to name a few. The daily routine of academic medicine, coupled with on-the-job training for the service component, was the oxygen that sustained me through long evenings of looking after sick patients. Working with my fellow residents was a real joy – the best experience ever. Friendships became lifelong and many of them are now eminent doctors and heads in their fields.

A “bump” on the road

Then, we made the happy discovery that she was pregnant with our first child! We had planned to have children early. But however you may plan for it, it would still be a bit of a shock when it happens. Endless questions kept popping up: “How are we going to cope with work, studies and examinations? How are we going to manage during the later part of the pregnancy? How long should she stay off work?” The months of morning sickness followed by fatigue became the daily routine then. We continued to go to work but it was hard going. As the husband, I often felt helpless as I could not do much except to give whatever emotional support I could.

When Jed was born, our married life totally changed. Carefree days were replaced by night duties without post call, with the constant need for nappy changes and night feeds. L felt that she didn’t really want to go back to hospital

work as that would take her away from baby Jed. I continued on in general medicine, frantically trying to prepare for the MRCP Part 2, while trying to find time to spend with the family.

L started doing GP locums to get a break from baby duties. After a month of being confined to the home looking after Jed, getting out was a great help and the change of environment was really therapeutic for her. She would follow her boss and mentor, Dr Goh Wei Leong, on house calls and would regale me with stories about visiting the elderly in the flats around People’s Park. It was then that she found the work to be very enriching, and she started considering family practice as a career.

As the MRCP Part 2 examinations loomed, I felt totally inadequate and unprepared, fearful of failure and uncertain about the future. All of that, however, vanished like the morning mist at daybreak after we

had a minor emergency at home. That event impressed on me indelibly just how important the family is for me. Though I then passed the MRCP and was earmarked for a career in gastroenterology, my heart just wasn't in it anymore. I couldn't see myself continuing on in hospital medicine for the years to come; for me, long hours working in a hospital setting meant much time taken away from my wife and family. L had already decided that hospital work wasn't for her, and that she would not go back to NUH to continue with her residency. She knew then that I was torn and unsure, and since she was planning to continue as a GP, she quipped, "How nice it would be for us to work together in the same clinic!"

After much deliberation, we finally decided to strike out together in general practice, side by side in the same clinic. We started our clinic in 1992, and have been in the same location, in the same rooms, side by side for the past 25 years.

Our adventure in the GP heartlands

We faced many struggles in the beginning. We had the usual financial worries about paying the rent and renovation loan. We worried about whether we would have enough work to pay our staff. We fretted about leaving our young son in the care of a maid: "Would he be safe? Would he become emotionally closer to her than to us?" As



private medical work is very competitive, we had to work long hours ourselves as our turnover then was not enough to justify paying for another doctor.

As a young family with small kids, we would not have been able to manage without the help of friends and family. We were fortunate to have the help of our parents, who watched over the kids when we were at work. We often make clinical decisions together and this has led us to enhance our respective skills. As a couple, we each have our own unique skillsets, and are complementary in all that we do. We experience the same challenges, the same worries and the same heartaches. Together, we faced enterovirus 71, H1N1 and SARS, and often went home with the fear that we might bring some deadly bug back to the family. With each crisis, we learnt to appreciate each other more, marvelled at each other's strengths, and supported each other's weaknesses.

As the years passed, we have taken on more colleagues who helped to offload some of our clinical duties. This decision was made in order for us to devote more of our time to the family. It is an investment of time and opportunity costs to build up our family unit. Did we sacrifice our hospital careers for this

life? No, we *exchanged* it for something way better, and built our "careers" around what is most important for us... our family!

Our children are all adults now and studying in overseas universities. As they are all in distant lands, we do miss them a lot, and take every opportunity to visit them. But, as any private GP will tell you, days away from clinic means lost revenue and that is the same for us.

But it is all worth it. It really is! ♦

Legend

1. Bonding in Busan
2. Towards new horizons!

Dr Tan Tze Lee is a family physician in private practice in Choa Chu Kang. A GP at heart, he believes strongly in family medicine, provided by family physicians embedded in the community.

