



The term “pro bono” is shortened from the Latin phrase “pro bono publico” which literally means “for the public good”.

I am not a natural born volunteer. I grew up in an era where, unlike today, volunteering was not something that schools taught or inculcated as part of the co-curricular activities. We had no idea what Community Involvement Programmes (CIPs) were. CIP was launched in 1997 by then Director-General of Education, Mr Wee Heng Tin. The initiative was originally intended to be part of compulsory National Education and aimed at building social cohesion and inculcating civic responsibility in pupils of all levels from primary to pre-university.

My volunteering journey

In fact, there were very few examples or opportunities for volunteer work outside of the church I attended. It was only after I started university education did I gradually start seeing opportunities for giving my time to helping others as a meaningful pursuit. One particularly memorable instance of my rude introduction to volunteering was when we tried to raise funds for a trip to Hong Kong in 1988. We went to a clinic in Mount Elizabeth to see a famous pioneer nephrologist. Instead of getting a donation, we received an erudite lecture on working for the poor and helping the less fortunate. From then on, I decided that aside from work, I would try to be

involved in causes that make a difference in larger ways while still placing focus on what we as doctors do well in helping everyone, one person at a time.

Between 1990 and 1995, I helped out in church in various ways. What I really enjoyed was being involved in a study class that was held within the church grounds during the examination period. It allowed me to meet young people, speak to them (between the studying) about their hopes and aspirations, and provide guidance as a “big brother”. In fact, those voluntary experiences contributed to my decision to choose psychiatry as a specialty.

Since then, I have volunteered in various capacities over the last 20 over years. I have been involved in several voluntary start-ups, such as the Child Abuse Action and Research Team (CARAT). CARAT was affiliated to the Society Against Family Violence (SAFV) and was formed by a few social workers and one aspiring psychiatrist to help with the follow-up of children who had been abused. This was in the 1990s, when child abuse was still largely an under-the-carpet occurrence with only the Singapore Children’s Society (<http://www.childrensociety.org.sg>) doing most of this work in the voluntary sector. Last year, I started an enterprise helping adult survivors of sexual abuse (<http://www.yakin.org>). Besides working directly with those in need, I have also helped by being part of the governance

structure of several voluntary welfare organisations (VWO) which is something that I must say have been quite eye opening to me.

As I am someone who looks for value in things – and by value, I mean the quality of the work in relation to the amount of monies spent – I apply this same principle to my volunteer work. Value, when translated to volunteering, means that the time spent (which is cost) should be commensurate with the benefit for the cause. For example, if we volunteer for an organisation that supports those with a chronic disease, our time should translate into actual support for those suffering from that disease. For that to happen well, there is a need for an efficient management system to channel the volunteers and their energies in the right direction, with maximum benefit for the cause and what it stands for. That can only happen when the mission of the cause is well defined and the VWO is performing its role with proper governance. Most of the time, we are concerned with financial governance but there is also a need to make sure that the work done is relevant to the cause.

My work with SAMH

My experience with the Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH; <http://www.samhealth.org.sg>) has been exciting to say the least. In 2001, my mentor and friend Prof Leslie Lim asked me to join SAMH and share my experiences in working with children.

This was during a period of change in the charity sector and we were some years from the problems faced by the National Kidney Foundation. I was quite green to doing governance work and was more interested in the daily running of the charity rather than how it was run and the value it was giving to people suffering from mental illness.

As I started to understand the mechanics of running a charity, I realised that management committees were really volunteers helping to administer the charity. It was only when we started to have committee retreats, with staff relooking at our vision and mission, that it became evident that we were missing the big picture. The composition of the management committee was mainly mental health professionals. We had little in terms of diversity and a quick look at our history suggested that the VWO was almost on the brink of running out of monies at some stage in the 40 years of its existence. Together with Leslie, we started to build a more diverse board and we added legal and finance expertise to the management committee.

We now have a president who is not a psychiatrist and a very diverse board bringing with it experiences from different sectors. We were awarded the inaugural Charity Governance Award in 2012 and we saw our annual operating budget rise to over \$5 million as we were operating ten centres with an emphasis on psychiatric rehabilitation and recovery.

Doctors and volunteerism

There are many past examples of doctors volunteering in various capacities in Singapore. I have no direct data of doctors volunteering, but in an editorial published in the December 1997 issue of the *Singapore Medical Journal*, well-known paediatrician Dr Kenneth Lyen

suggested that doctors as volunteers are found in many charities and many hold leadership positions. However, that was 20 years ago. Today, as we turn to the 138 health charities (of which 83 are classified as Institutions of Public Character), how many have doctors leading these charities? Perhaps many are invisible volunteers working hard behind the scenes; I certainly hope so. Are there reasons why doctors don't volunteer as much today? Could it be that they have become too materialistic or that in balancing work and life, there is precious little time that the doctor has for volunteerism? Perhaps more are volunteering overseas which may seem more glamorous?

I believe that doctors would make great volunteers because of three good reasons:

- (1) Volunteering is our baby. Volunteering is defined as an altruistic activity in which an individual provides services for no financial gain to the benefit of others. The first volunteers included doctors and the volunteer spirit is one of the tenets of our profession – public service – and is the essence of the Latin translation of pro bono. Funny how this term is used more often in legal service than in medical service these days.
- (2) Volunteering is in our blood. Our ethical mandate is a commitment to compassion and charity. Many of the hospitals and medical schools were built on the volunteering spirit. Today, free medical clinics still exist because there are doctors who have the heart to help the poor and less fortunate. I will always remember my consultant who gave money to a patient when he was hungry.
- (3) Volunteering is in our brain. The physician is often seen as leaders in many societies. In Singapore, doctors are among the brightest and best

of their cohorts. We should have the opportunity to use our heads to alleviate suffering in the heartlands of our society.

SMA is now actively developing a volunteering and charity mission to get doctors to do more for the less fortunate (<https://www.sma.org.sg/smacares>) and has started a charity fund in 2012 to help the less fortunate. *SMA News* runs regular columns on volunteer opportunities and experiences, and also provides free publicity space for charitable causes. I strongly encourage all doctors to consider volunteering. If you are not sure of what capacity you would like to volunteer in, you could take a look at the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre's volunteer page (<http://www.giving.sg/volunteer>) for some inspiration. ♦

SMA and the SMA Charity Fund support volunteerism among our profession. *SMA News* provides charitable organisations with complimentary space to publicise their causes. To find out more, email news@sma.org.sg or visit the SMA Cares webpage at <https://www.sma.org.sg/smacares>.

Legend

1. SAMH representatives A/Prof Fung and executive director Ms Rajeswari receiving the inaugural Charity Governance Award from Minister Lawrence Wong in 2012

A/Prof Daniel Fung didn't volunteer to be a father of five children when he uttered his wedding vows but does not regret any moment of it especially after he saw his eldest daughter Grace get married. Among his other voluntary work, he is involved with Paya Lebar Methodist Girls' School, Singapore Association for Mental Health and Singapore Children's Society.

