

Never Too Old Never Too Late

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

The editorial team has such a great sense of timing and pacing when they plan these thematic issues. Last month, we talked about ageing – this month, let us talk about ageing well! It is a fact of life that we all will grow old and die. We can choose how we live and, to some extent, how we die. I do not mean anything literal like assisted suicide (that is going to take a lot more learned minds and robust discussion!). I refer to things that I can control, such as keeping fit and going for regular screenings to pick up early diseases. If I can avoid certain lifestyle-related conditions, why not? Another thing that I can control is my own mindset. Being grateful and thankful for every moment that I am alive and well; and even in the midst of adversity, to find joy and peace knowing that one has good friends and support.

Whether one chooses to retire at a certain age or to work until the end, it is a personal decision. Our professional duty demands that we **must** be competent in mind and body to carry out our work. One needs to have the **insight** to realise that one is no longer coping as well – and that one may cause more harm to the patients than good – **and** then have the **humility** to accept that and retire, rather than pridefully continue on. The team has put together a series of articles as food for thought.

You are never too old to live your dream

老骥伏枥，志在千里 (Literally, an old warhorse in the stable still longs to gallop a thousand miles). We make much of youth, and we lament about getting older. How much of this is self-

imposed? Why do we not treasure our relative youth until we look back? After becoming a mother, I thought that I had become old(er), and also attained the “auntie” status. But thanks to colleagues in their 50s and 60s looking at me kindly and telling me, “You are very young *lah!*”, it has been a great reminder that, yes, if the fates be kind, I have a long way ahead of me!

Friends on my social media follow my exploits. In recent years, I deliberately try out at least one new activity in my birthday month. It could be something which I have been interested in, but have not gotten around to, because either no money, no time, did not dare to, did not want to go alone, or scared of what other people would say.

Well, with age comes thicker skin and a bit more disposable income. One “dream”

I am happy to share about is that, ever since I watched the movie *Yamakasi* in 2002, I have been super inspired to do parkour. But I am not a sporty person, and as the years went by, I got heavier and even more unfit. Four years ago, I finally got into a habit and made several small, sustainable changes to my daily routine. At last, I felt fit and confident enough to sign up for a ladies' only, beginner's class for parkour. I am the oldest in my class, but it feels good to hang out with these younger ladies in their 20s. They are so full of life and energy, super encouraging, and they often assume that I can do the same things as them! (*faints*) But guess what, they are right. Some movements may be harder for me; for example, a few of them scaled up a wall almost effortlessly from the get-go, but after a few tries with a focus on technique, I **was** also able to do that by the end of the lesson!

So, who knows, maybe I will be able to advance to free running in time to come!
#ageisjustanumber

What we do in life echoes for all eternity

人过留名，雁过留声 (Literally, a person leaves their reputation, as a swallow leaves its call). The above header is a quote from the truly epic movie *Gladiator*. For some great people, their names and achievements will naturally go down in the history books – for better or for worse. History is written by the victors, but who were they truly? Were they truly so benevolent and wise? Or were they really tyrannical? Surely, they were not so one-dimensional. Some pass into legend, and others fade into obscurity, but no one truly knows the person they had been.

For the common folk, I believe our "immortality" is achieved by the impact we leave behind on the people around us, whether it is our patients, their families, our family and friends or the communities we serve in. What is enlightening and comforting is that we do not even have to be known by name, only by the legacy we leave behind. We are known in the way that the people we influenced in turn influence others.

Treat others with kindness and create a culture of care. Our children, our students, the patients we looked after – will they remember us with fondness? Will they remember the values we taught, and in turn pass them on? **That** will be our legacy that will be passed down through the generations.

Do not ever discount yourself; do not think that the action of a single individual has no impact. As Galadriel said in the movie *The Lord of the Rings*, "even the smallest person can change the course of the future".

We must always seek to learn

活到老，学到老 (Literally, to continue learning, for as long as we live). Doctors are used to Continuing Medical Education as a regular update of our professional knowledge. Besides this, I personally believe that I can always keep learning and pick up new life skills. I can make new friends and talk to peers and younger folk to find out new stuff. If I find myself frustrated or angry at something, then that topic is clearly my weak point. So, I shall accept the challenge and learn about it.

The only constant is change, and if we do not change, we are just setting ourselves up for disappointment and failure. Look at how modes of writing have changed. From cave drawings and commandments carved in stone, to quill and parchment, pen and paper – followed by the typewriter, keyboard, smartphones with text prediction, and now with voice dictation to text capabilities. Guess how I did up this column?

With so many competing commitments all vying for my time, I need to constantly look for ways to be able to do things faster, in more efficient and safer ways. Embracing technology and making use of it in the appropriate manner helps to save a lot of time. The IT woes in the past weeks have left many healthcare workers on the ground unhappy, frustrated and angry. I understand, I really do. Until this day, I still cannot handle a broken-down printer, with paper stuck and the ink cartridge all run out.

Yet I recognise that the change is necessary, to have a more integrated electronic healthcare system to handle big data and the sharing and transmission of healthcare information, with appropriate guardianship of the information. It is just a matter of timing that makes our generation the one to support this launch. I know that the IT folks and healthcare workers who are leading this big change have put in tremendous amounts of work planning for months or even years in advance. I ask for the public to be understanding and to assist healthcare workers as we grapple with the teething problems of a new, massive system.

October is super meaningful for me, professionally. Two major health milestones are in October: Breast Cancer Awareness Month over the entire month, and Mental Health Day on 10 October. I hope that all of you have reminded your loved ones, especially the ladies, to go for their screening mammograms. I also hope that you have all done a mental health check-up yourself, to make sure that you are healthy not just in body, but also in mind. ♦

"If everything around you seems dark, look again. You may be the light." – Rumi, Persian poet.

Dr Tan is a mother to three kids, wife to a surgeon; a daughter and a daughter-in-law. She trained as a general surgeon, and entered private practice in mid-2019, focusing on breast surgery. She treasures her friends and wishes to have more time for her diverse interests: cooking, eating, music, drawing, writing, photography and comedy.

