

# Family Matters to the Pongs

By Dr Lawrence Ang

## Editor's Note

On 12 November 2001, the Pong family was presented with the Young Parents magazine's award for the Family of the Year 2001. We have invited 2 of the doctors in the family, Dr Humphrey Pong (patriarch of the family) and Dr Lawrence Ang (his son-in-law) to share their stories with our readers.

As we approach the yuletide season for the second time in this millennium, the sobering atmosphere that greets us today contrasts with the climate of celebration that we all enjoyed the previous Christmas. The bleak economic situation, exacerbated by the horrific events of 11 September, has had a downward impact on all our lives. While those in the private sector are encountering a frightening drop in volumes, our institutional colleagues will also have to endure pay reductions and lower bonuses.

Thankfully, one entity seems to have emerged quite unscathed from the prevailing dark social and economic picture. It is the institution of the "Family". I thank God that amidst all this uncertainty, I can retreat into the refuge of my "Family". This timeless institution recharges our physical strength when we are drained after a hectic day's work, provides us with hope when we are down, restores our smiles in the face of adversity, and renews us with the spirit and energy to enter the new day.

The nucleus of my family and that of my wife's is none other than my father and father-in-law. With all due respect to those who have lost their fathers, in my family, without them, I probably would not be where I am today. It seems a strange coincidence that both my father and in-law are doctors, and both were foreigners (from Malaysia and Hong Kong respectively). They settled in Singapore after graduation, married their local sweethearts and amalgamated into the local medical community. Both enjoyed fulfilling medical careers; my father recently retired as Medical Director of the IMH, while my in-law continues

to work in semi-retirement as a General Practitioner after selling his clinic. More importantly (and the reason for this article), they remained monogamous (seems a big challenge these days) and successfully raised 3 children each in the last 35 years. Amongst them are a lawyer, a banker, a managing director, 2 medical specialists and the youngest remains in medical school. On 12 November 2001, at the prize presentation ceremony of the "Family of the Year Award 2001", the Master of Ceremony commented that my father-in-law's accomplishments would be the envy of most Singaporeans and that he is probably as close to the "Singapore Dream" as anyone could get.

The success of both my "fathers" in raising their children and keeping their families together did not occur by chance. I believe that they possessed certain traits and qualities that enabled them to arrive at their present positions today. First and foremost, both are God-fearing Christians. Secondly, they both possessed an immense love and affection for their respective wives. In contrast to societal norms, they never craved to be high achievers in their medical careers especially if it was at the expense of family activities. Yet, they were men of honesty and integrity, they never shirked their professional responsibilities and could

still contribute actively to the medical community. My father continues to lead a simple lifestyle with little indulgence in the finer things in life that many of his contemporaries (at his age) are more accustomed to. For instance, he has only driven second-hand cars of Japanese make, has never been on the golf course and is a complete teetotaler. My father-in-law on the other hand, spends much of his free time in church. What is left of his free time is spent interacting with his 7 grandchildren, and cooking up a feast 2 to 3 times a week when the extended family gathers. What sets them apart (in my eyes) is their simple non-conformist attitudes and their unquestionable devotion and loyalty to their wives and their children.

While I seem to be trumpeting all the positive values that have made my 2 families what they are today, I am certain there are many of you "senior" readers who can also lay claim to the same attributes that both my fathers possess. And this is the reason why I hope that you younger ones would pause for a moment, take stock of all that has happened in the past year, reflect on all the sweat and labour spent in moulding us, and use this time to remember and pay tribute to all (including our husbands/wives) who have built up our families to what they are today. ■



Dr Humphrey Pong (seated, fifth from left), Dr Lawrence Ang (standing, second last from right) and the rest of the Pong family.

## About the author:

Dr Lawrence Ang  
(MBBS, 1990)  
graduated from NUS.  
He is a gynaecologist  
in private practice.

# Interview with the Patriarch of the Pong Family

## – Winner of the Family of the Year 2001 Award

### 1. WHAT DOES THE FAMILY OF THE YEAR 2001 AWARD MEAN TO YOU?

**Dr Pong:** As the patriarch of our family of 14, including my children's spouses and my 6 grandchildren, I am of course proud. As I reflected on the path we have taken to get to this stage of life, I felt that the journey started when my children were still young.

### 2. WHAT WERE YOUR PRIORITIES BRINGING UP YOUR CHILDREN?

**Dr Pong:** Both my wife and I inculcated values in our children so that they can be responsible adults to bring up their own brood. Values such as filial piety were taught by example – they observed the way we treated our own parents.

I was the dictator and yet the mentor of my kids. From the age of one to five, I imposed absolute authority; whatever I said went. If corporal punishment was necessary, so be it. After the age of five, there was no more punishment. I reasoned with them and explained every one of my actions, as well as the rights and wrongs in the way we react to other people. The fact that everyone is good for something taught my children to give people their due respect. The children were encouraged to reason things out.

When I was operating a clinic in Queenstown, my living quarters were just upstairs from my practice. This gave me a lot of time to interact with my children. Every Saturday night, we gathered them on our bed for the weekly pow-wow. Everyone could express his or her pleasures, or displeasures for that matter. The understanding of each other's feelings developed into a permanent bond. They feel so secure that even to this day my children and their children sit on our bed to watch TV or just relating the day's events. You guessed right, I have a pretty big bed. Later on, even my sons-in-law and daughter-in-law are included.

### 3. NOW THAT YOUR CHILDREN HAVE GROWN UP AND HAVE

### THEIR OWN CAREERS AND STARTED THEIR OWN FAMILIES, WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

**Dr Pong:** All my children were educated overseas. I had never determined what they should become. And certainly, none was encouraged to be a doctor. They saw how hard the old man had to work; the night calls and the long hours that a struggling GP put in.

There were some surprises in the end. Gregory, the eldest went to Washington University to study interior design. Now he is managing director of an interior design company involved in many local and overseas projects. Karen, my second child, the quiet one, read law in Bristol, and is now the legal officer in a Norwegian firm. Jasmine, my youngest, the one most likely to have become a doctor, is a chartered accountant groomed by Price Waterhouse, and now working as a Vice-President in an American firm.

Each of my girls married a doctor: Karen to Lawrence the gynaecologist, and Jasmine to Paul who has a practice in Jurong. I'd like to think they love me so much that in marriage they still experience a part of me, the professional part.

What is so special is that the siblings developed a close relationship that is still present even after marriage and having children of their own. They enjoy each

other's company as well as that of us old folks. The whole family gets together a few times a week for dinner, a walk in the park, or any other activity. In October 1999, the whole family travelled to Sydney and the Gold Coast for 2 weeks.

### 4. DO YOU HAVE ANY MESSAGE FOR YOUR YOUNGER COLLEAGUES?

**Dr Pong:** Here is my message to young doctors who are starting their own families. I know you are working very long hours because you have to pay the rent. Especially with the spouse working as well, you should make it a point to spend more quality time with your children. You have to be there as parents to guide and nurture these young minds. Don't leave the guidance until they are older. If you have no time for your kids, and you feel guilty being away from them day and night, the impulse is to spoil them with material things, toys and such. Worse still, to give way to their tantrums. By the time you are in your middle age, have made enough money, and think it is time to slow down to enjoy the fruits of your labour, the children which you had no time for when they were young, will be the cause of much family disharmony and heartaches. By then, it would be too late to do anything. ■

#### About the author:

*Dr Humphrey Pong (MBBS, 1962) graduated from the University of Sydney. He is a "retired" GP who now works at a health-screening clinic.*

#### INVITATION FOR CONTRIBUTIONS FROM READERS

Do you have an interesting story to tell or wish to share your views on issues concerning the medical community? We are looking for articles in the following genres:

1. Report - factual accounts of events
2. Commentary - balanced discussions and comments
3. Personally Speaking - views and opinions of writer
4. Materia Non-medica - travel tales, anecdotes, hobbies and hangouts
5. The First Time - reflections and accounts of 'first times' as doctors
6. On Being a Doctor - reflections on the art, science and life as a doctor
7. On Being a Patient - reflections of patients

Your article should be between 600 - 1800 words. Articles must be TYPEWRITTEN and sent to us via email at krysaniasma@sg (articles in MS Word or RTF format; photos in .jpg or .gif formats), fax to 224 7827, or mail to Singapore Medical Association, Alumni Medical Centre, Level 2, 2 College Road, S 169850.

#### Please also include

- a. "three liner" about yourself (you may also wish to publish your email address for readers to contact you);
- b. a photograph of yourself (if a soft copy is not available, you can send us an original which we will scan and then return to you); and
- c. contact information.

**Note: The Editor reserves the right to edit and publish articles submitted.**