

Simple Things

By Dr John Chiam, Editorial Board Member



Cathy and John.

I've seen a lot of suffering, a lot of pain, in the 4½ short years that I've become a doctor. It is, unfortunately, an inexorable part of medicine – indeed, an inescapable fact of life and living. I've seen how patients fall sick, and I've seen how they get sicker – this despite everything the good-meaning doctor does – and I've seen how patients ultimately die from their sicknesses.

Then, there is the non-physiological aspect of pain and suffering with which the patient (as well as his or her family) has to contend. Who can deny the mental, emotional or financial suffering that is heaped upon the patient, along with his illness?

A prolonged stay in hospital costs money – a lot of money. The patient feels bad to have brought this upon his family; the family feels torn by the feelings of pity for the patient, as well as the feelings of bitterness at the prolonged illness. And, everyone ends up a loser, if the focus of anger and resentment is shifted from that of the sickness, to that of the sufferer.

I see this happen on a daily basis. And I can't help but feel for my patients and their families.

How can I not feel the sadness of the elderly mother, whose curse was that she outlived all her sons and daughters? I've seen how a 90-year-old mother, still sharp and with her mental agility intact, break down and cry over the body of her 68-year-old son who had just succumbed to nasopharyngeal carcinoma. It's a heart-rending sight.

Equally poignant was the sight I had to endure, of a 6-year-old boy,

unsure of why it was that his mother no longer breathed or moved, or opened her eyes to his gentle tugging. She's dead, and her son hasn't even begun to understand the meaning and the irreversible finality of death.

The suffering didn't always have to be from the report of a life's passing. News of a stroke in an erstwhile fit and active 50-year-old is just as devastating. She might as well be dead, she had said. Her words still echo clearly in my mind after all these years.

But, there have been days when the news has not been all bad, and the stories have not been all sad. And I relish, and cherish these days most of all.

The look of pure relief on the face of my patient, a 30-year-old smoker who had initially presented with haemoptysis – blood in his cough – when we cleared him of a lung cancer, for now. His relief was palpable, tangible and total, the anxious worrying over the past few weeks suddenly expunged, and life is seen through a different set of eyes from now on. He has even made an agreement to stop smoking, the reprieve and the warning he received from his brush with cancer forever fresh in his mind. He's kept good his word so far.

Or the joy on the face of the mother, at the end of a difficult birth, as she cuddled her newborn and looked lovingly at the baby's wet face. All the pain, forgotten and erased by the sight of a new life, her baby son, safe now in her arms.

These things – such simple things, of life and of death – can carry so powerful a meaning to those who are asked to bear their tidings.

And, as I come to the end of yet another year – a year filled with many such sorrows, such joys and almost every other emotion between these 2 extremes, I once again reflect on how these experiences have endeared themselves to me. What have I learnt from my patients' pain and their relief? What then, does all this mean to someone who has had a share in all these emotions, all these events?

Well, for one, I've learnt to be thankful for the little things in life. I'm grateful for good health – that I don't have to use crutches to walk, and that I have full use of my limbs. Things that my 50-year-old stroke patient would trade the world for.

I'm grateful for the blessing that I can still experience the simple pleasures of a new sunrise and view another sunset. I'm thankful that I have my wife and my family with me, at my side, for every one of these dawns and day's ends. It may not be much, but it'll be more than what the motherless 6-year-old will ever have.

I'm grateful that my hospital approved my leave, so I could celebrate a 53rd birthday – my mother's – together with my family, and as a family. What would the 90-year-old mother give to celebrate another birthday with her son?

All too often, we spend so much time pursuing so many other adventures, and so many other ambitions. We spend so much energy chasing after dreams and running after shadows. Sometimes, we forget to be grateful that we can simply still do that: chase, run, and walk.

We fuss over bruised egos, calculate over how much is owed to us for our efforts, tarry over promotions due to us and worry when we're passed over for those promotions. And we forget to be grateful that we still have work, and employment, and an element of financial security.

We worry about how well we'll do in our examinations, and how much better we'll do than the next examinee, and how much more somebody else is studying than we are. Of course, we forget to consider how privileged we are, our basic senses intact and our mental faculties unbroken: these simple abilities at our disposal for whatever purpose we choose.

Yet, if we had only taken a minute to contemplate, our health – both mental and physical, our family and our lives – these simple things are such precious, priceless things.

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Yes, I've learnt many lessons in my 4¹/₂ years as a doctor. From learning how to set cannulas in young baby patients, to learning how to appreciate the immeasurable happiness that a baby brings to his or her parents. From learning how to battle cancer,

to learning how it feels to lose that battle – and just how precious, stripped bare and exposed for all its frailties, life is.

Indeed, there have been many priceless lessons, from a great many unforgettable teachers. The tears of that 90-year-old mother, the

innocent incomprehension of the 6-year-old child, the relief on the face of my 30-year-old ex-smoker patient.

They've taught me well. And from them, and so many others, I've learnt to be grateful for the simple things.

Season's greetings to one and all. ■