

SMA NEWS



Taking in the Huanglong scenic area of Jiuzhaigou and its beautiful emerald ponds: Dr Ang and his wife, Judy.

Journey into Psychiatry

By Krysanja Tan



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In September 2004, the Institute of Mental Health conferred Emeritus Consultant on Dr Ang Ah Ling. In an interview at his office, Dr Ang recounts his journey into Psychiatry, and shares his thoughts on his new role and being a mentor to younger doctors.

"It was a pleasant surprise. I didn't expect it." Smiled Dr Ang Ah Ling when asked about his new appointment as Emeritus Consultant at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

Although Dr Ang reached retirement age two years ago, he continues to work. "I'm quite happy to be working. And I don't have to go on night calls anymore, which is a concession - I've done enough calls in my life, even when I was a Consultant! Physically, I'm still okay. I've never taken a single day of medical leave throughout my whole career, even when I was quite sick."

THE LONG ROAD HOME

Growing up in Batu Pahat, a town in Johore, Malaysia, the Emeritus Consultant recounts: "My group of friends in Form Six (Singapore's equivalent of Junior College) were in Engineering or Science. I was the only one doing Biology. At that time, we had all applied for scholarships, and I got one to do Medicine in Singapore. I would have been quite happy doing Engineering. But, it would be a waste not to take up the scholarship."

Dr Ang's brother, who was already doing Medicine, was also an influence.

After graduating from the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Medicine in 1965, he returned to Malaysia to serve his bond, even though he had found his Singaporean girlfriend, Judy, who he married in October the same year. "I could stay in Singapore and pay back, but I felt I should return to serve my bond and National Service."

To stay close to his girlfriend, Dr Ang did his housemanship in General Hospital, and then worked as a Medical Officer in Tampoi Mental Hospital, both in Johore. "Psychiatry wasn't my first choice. In medical school, our only exposure was one visit to Woodbridge Hospital and a few lectures. But the mental hospital was one of those places where nobody wanted to go, and if you applied, you would get in. There were three of us with girlfriends in Singapore and all of us applied. That's how I got into Psychiatry!"

In 1972, Dr Ang received a Malaysian Armed Forces scholarship to pursue Psychiatry in UK, after which he served another bond in a military hospital in Malacca. During that time, he would drive down the old highway, at least once a

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Published by the Singapore Medical Association, Level 2, Alumni Medical Centre, 2 College Road, Singapore 169850.
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Fax: 6224-7827
Email: news@sma.org.sg
URL: http://www.sma.org.sg

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fortnight on weekends, to see his wife and young sons in Singapore. "I thought nothing of driving almost 200 miles. Interestingly, when something is pushing you to travel all that distance, you don't feel it at all – I accepted it. I've fallen asleep at the wheel a few times, but some power up there was kind and kept me alive. I'll also stop halfway in Batu Pahat where my mother still is, have lunch or dinner, or spend a night, and continue my journey."

Although the frequent road trips are no longer necessary, Dr Ang still returns to Batu Pahat two to three times a year to visit his mother, and enjoy the slower pace of life.

In 1981, he finally finished serving all his bonds and joined Woodbridge as a Psychiatrist. "By then, I had to come back to Singapore – if not, my wife would divorce me!" Dr Ang laughs.

PSYCHIATRY AND THE LAW

Well-respected in the field of forensic psychiatry, Dr Ang is known for his important role in the Michael Fay case in 1993, as the psychiatrist who examined the teenager. "It was just a small case that got blown up. The American press also played it up. There was no question about him being punished, but it's a question of the punishment. Of course, in a culture where there're a lot of personal rights, they fought very hard against the caning. That was a very trying time, especially for the people dealing with the press and foreign affairs, and for the police."

Dr Ang attributes his expertise and experience to circumstances. "Many of the murder trials I handled went to court. I got to know quite a number of people from the Attorney General's Chamber and we became quite good friends. Sometimes, they would ring me up for my advice. That was how I got more interested in Forensic Psychiatry, which I find quite interesting and challenging. When you go to court, you must be able to defend what you say and write. You learn to think more deeply and be more precise. In time, you also establish credibility with the Court. In government practice, we are more objective. That's basically how the AG Chambers see us. We are not pro-prosecution – we assist the Court. If we see there is a case for the defendant, we will say so, and they usually accept our advice. We are in a very good position to help a person if we can."

"Nowadays, I don't particularly take on forensic cases, unless I am requested to, or the AG Chambers calls up and asks for my opinion. I function more on an advisory role now."

WORDS OF WISDOM

Now that he is Emeritus Consultant, the second in IMH, after Dr Chee Kuan Tsee, what does Dr Ang see his new role as?

"I think being so much more senior, there is a different role to play. More so in Psychiatry, where you deal with people, experience matters a lot. The senior ones would have seen a bigger pool of cases. We may not be as creative at problem-solving – especially with computers and technology – but we can share what we've gone through and advise on medico-

legal and ethical matters."

Indeed, Heads of Departments, who tend to be younger nowadays, often seek counsel from the Emeritus Consultant. "It's easier for a junior Head to ask me, rather than his subordinates who can be the same age. Since I'm in a more neutral position, they feel more comfortable talking to me. Moreover, some of them started out when we were Consultants or their supervisors, and they still see us as their mentors. So, they don't mind taking advice from us since we are so much more senior."

Dr Ang derives his greatest sense of achievement through the success stories, or just being able to help a patient solve a problem.

But, he also tells younger doctors: "Psychiatry is not like Medicine or Surgery where you can cut off the offending part and the person is cured. If you can cure the patient, or help him solve a problem, well and good. But, some illnesses, like schizophrenia, are chronic. Be prepared to stay a long time with somebody who's not going to recover, no matter what you do – and you have to accept that. You also need the ability to listen and empathise; and there's a lot of counselling and problem-solving. It's satisfying when you can help to patch a marriage or help someone come out of depression, but they may go in again. If it happens, don't be too disheartened. Our expectations and measure of success are quite different. Something like preventing a suicide is also lifesaving, like a surgery to remove a malignant tumour."

"However, if you only want to treat patients where you can get quick and tangible results, you should not do Psychiatry. It's not a glamorous speciality."

GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

"The stigma attached to mental patients is always there, not just in Singapore, but elsewhere like UK, too. It didn't help that the old Woodbridge was such a dreary place, and people got frightened just looking at it. But, after the place was rebuilt in 1993 with more spacious grounds and condominium-style

Dr Ang Ah Ling, MBBS(S)(1965), DPM(Eng)(1973), MRCPsych(UK)(1974) is currently Emeritus Consultant at the IMH, which he had also headed as Medical Director from 1996 to 2000.

His other appointments include:

- Clinical Senior Lecturer, NUS
- Member, Specialist Training Committee for Psychiatry, Graduate School of Medical Studies, NUS
- Member, Inter-Ministry Committee for the Review of the Mental Disorders and Treatment Act

Dr Ang received the Public Administration Medal (Silver) (PPA(P)) in 1999.



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landscaping, it has helped a great deal. Now, we are surrounded by new HDB flats and people are even jogging around the grounds. We have outreach programmes involving the community, visiting schools and providing talks, to educate people about mental illnesses and that it can be treated. I see it as gradually winning over the public.”

“If only employers can be more tolerant. We are developing a community programme to rehabilitate our patients so that they can return to the community. Many voluntary organisations are also running day centres, taking over our chronic patients and teaching them some trade. Perhaps, one day, every company that has more than 200 employees will employ at least five to ten mentally handicapped people. In UK, they have the DRO where it’s almost a requirement that at least 5% of the hirings are handicapped. The company is also given some concessions. But, generally, employers are more enlightened now. People don’t associate mental patients with violence as readily. And almost all hospitals have psychiatric units now.”

UNDER ONE ROOF

After a hard day’s work, Dr Ang looks forward to home, where he lives with his wife, two of his three sons, an O&G specialist and a medical student; and three grandchildren. “My house is fortunately quite big. When I got my place, I had wanted all my children to stay together with me. My second son is married and living on his own, but he comes back on Sundays.”



*Celebrating Matthew’s fifth birthday in Sydney, March 2004.
(L-R) Dr Ang’s grandchildren – Alison, Matthew, Claire.*

His second son, an ophthalmologist, is currently overseas on HMDP.

When he is not spending time with the family or bringing his grandchildren out for a run, Dr Ang tends to his garden. “I started with a small patch, and it took me seven to eight years to cover the whole place, which is fairly big. It’s a training in patience, watching the patch grow by inches every month. Now, I have to maintain and weed the garden, and it’s not easy. But, it gives me the exercise I need and I enjoy it.”

On his good health, Dr Ang says that he does not observe a strict diet, and continues to take one to two eggs a day – yet, his cholesterol remains low. He attributes his slim build to “good genes”.

This Christmas, Dr Ang has the same wish: “Good health for the family, and to stay together. And always have a thankful heart for little mercies.” ■