

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Guest Editor & Editorial Board Member

The Gift of Christmas

When you cannot leave the house without the umbrella, when the Orchard malls are as crowded on weekdays as on weekends, when you cannot escape the ubiquitous piped-in Christmas carols, and when you encounter a traffic jam close to midnight on the CTE, you know that it is December and Christmas is around the corner. The year-end is special for many of us as the kids are done with the school year and families can travel for their annual vacation. You feel a relief when you review the past eleven months and note the many things that you have accomplished despite the busy schedule. You also fret when you check your Christmas gift list and realise how little time you have left to shop.

As for me, I often start the year-end with excited anticipation. It is time to dig out all the Christmas CDs from the drawer and play them in the car. The cool temperature and grey skies somehow create a wintry feeling and I look forward to getting together with friends and families to celebrate the festivities. Unfortunately, the pace quickens as we begin the mad rush to get all the necessary presents and frantically check everything twice to ensure no one is left out and no one receives the same gift two years in a row. Then it is staying up late on many nights wrapping all the gifts in a 'war zone' strewn with wrappers, ribbons and 3M Scotch tape. The haste is further exacerbated with the need to coordinate the guest list with the Christmas Eve's menu. Don't you feel fatigue already hearing all these?

It is no wonder that the meaning of celebrating Christmas can be obscured or even lost in the bustle. So I am glad that this year, the meaning was restored for me early by an inspiring story. My classmate, an ENT surgeon in Mount Elizabeth, makes regular trips to a remote village in Indonesia to volunteer his surgical service. He usually flies in for two days to remove a dozen goiters with simple anaesthesia. On one of these trips, he met an 11-year old boy with a humongous goiter that was so heavy that he was literally bent over. He

could not lie on his back when he slept because it would compress his trachea and obstruct breathing. His cervical spine X-ray had already demonstrated degenerative changes. My ENT friend knew it was not possible to undertake the excision there without killing him. His parents were devastated when informed through the translator that the boy could not be helped.

His plight was posted on the internet, and amazingly, it was read by an ex-Indonesian who is working for NASA. He pledged to cover the cost involved in bringing the child to Mount Elizabeth Hospital to be operated by my friend, and for a team of kind-hearted specialists to support the pre- and post-operation care. I was told that these kind Singaporean doctors were waiving their professional fees and my friend was negotiating with Parkway Holdings to grant a substantive discount. The Indonesian boy was operated successfully on 28 November 2005 and a 1.8kg thyroid tumour was removed. He was given a chance to live a normal life and received probably the best Christmas present of his life. I am confident that the doctors, nurses and others who volunteered to care for him received their equivalent of an invaluable Christmas gift.

In this issue, you will read various accounts of the gift of giving. I realise, and I believe you will also agree, that is what makes Christmas special. ■



May you have a Blessed Christmas and a very Happy New Year!

