

By Dr Tan Wu Meng, Editorial Board Member

Christmas Reflections

Christmas has different meanings to different people. For some, it is a time of warmth, family and worship. For some others, it is a time for gifts and purchasing. For a significant few of our colleagues, it will be a time for work on the Christmas shift, and that shift can be as lonely as it is quiet, or as draining as it is busy.

Among the patients whom we serve, Christmas will be a joyous time for some as they leave the hospital to rejoin their loved ones.

The more ill may have to settle for seeing their loved ones by the bedside in the ward, rather than at home.

Some patients will have nobody to visit them this Christmas. Us doctors and nurses will be their extended family *in lieu*.

A few of our patients will have mixed fortunes. They may have living relatives still. But for them, it is a bitter fortune to have, for is it better not to have loved ones, or to have loved ones who do not love them?

Many of us will be familiar with this story, either through personal experience or anecdote: the patient arrives a day or two before Christmas. There is no clear pathology, no clear precipitant. What is clear is that somebody will eventually come to bring them home after the public

holiday. I remember a colleague describing it as “vacation-induced hospitalisation”. Perhaps the underlying diagnosis is not the failure of a tangible physiological system, but the deterioration of something more intangible and more precious. To paraphrase an old riddle, if an elderly parent is left in the concrete forest, with nary a sound of protest, has a tree of family still fallen?

For many people, Christmas is a time of birth and redemption. But for some it is also the end of life. During my last Christmas call, a patient was admitted directly to the Intensive Care Unit in *extremis*. I remember following the parameters and results through the night, wondering if we would win the battle to keep her alive, despite the odds against surviving triple organ failure.

That is why Christmas, for me, is a time to reflect on what we have, and how we can help those who have not. If this season you feel the pangs of unexpressed charity, or the impetus to make a difference, go forth and be that instrument of change. Poverty, illness and hardship obey no calendar drafted by mortal men. But as mortal men and women, we still have the ability to make some small change in the life of another. ■

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