

Tribute to Dr Agnes Koong

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The first time I actually met and talked to Dr Agnes Koong was when back in 2014. I was a young family physician in SingHealth Polyclinics attending a research conference and she was then the Clinic Director of SHP-Marine Parade. I still remember being struck by her passion and clarity of thought on hearing her perspectives on patient care. Although I did not imagine it at that time, she would later become my beloved mentor and a very good friend. Indeed, she was a mentor and a good friend to many people I know in the Family Medicine Fraternity.

Agnes was always such a positive person, and her can-do spirit was very infectious to all around her. Integrating the health and social dimensions in person-centred care had always been her passion and vision. After years of engaging community partners on the ground, she started her PhD in 2019 and embarked on her brainchild, the Primary Care-based Integrated Community Care Team Intervention. At the same time, she also started the preliminary work for HealthUp!, a bold initiative to meet the preventive health needs of the community. It was always so energising and inspiring to hear her speak of her plans for the future.

She gave her best in everything she did, be it for work, or for her family. Besides clinical work, she was an avid educator. She mentored medical students, and was also an active faculty member for the GDFM and FCFP programmes in the College of Family Physicians Singapore. She also served on the Council of the College from 2017 till 2021. On weekends she dedicated her time to her family, planning outings and events for her children.

She always saw the best in people and tried to bring that out. She wanted to find out the story behind the person: Were they a photographer before? Would they like to volunteer their skills and their time? Even now we have



patients coming back to share how much she did for them and how much she cared.

She worked hard, but also played hard. She believed strongly in self-care and held sessions to promote this amongst the clinic's staff. She would often bring her lunch to the nearby East Coast Park in the pre-COVID days; and organise post-work jogging or yoga sessions. Both of us loved bubble tea and we would share our recommendations for the best bubble tea in the region. She got me Alishan tea leaves when she visited Taiwan with her family; I shared with her how to do best cold-brews.

I remember that week in July last year when she messaged that she wouldn't be coming in to work because of an eye problem. The next I heard was that she had been diagnosed with leukemia. It didn't faze her though. She took it all in her stride and stayed positive all the way, undergoing grueling treatments one after the other. We said, if anyone could get through this, it would be Agnes. She worked from her hospital bed, even requesting for evening discharges as she had back-to-back meetings from noon all the way till 5pm. During my visits to her in hospital and home, she would still be giving me advice on how to manage the clinic, and my children. It was typical of her and the person she was, always concerned for others despite her own difficulties. We had a great Zoom party for her birthday in June and she had a long schedule of visitors all lined up, from family to friends, colleagues and even patient volunteers from the clinic. This just shows that she was dear to so many people from all walks of life.

Unfortunately, the battle remained an uphill one and she left us in September 2021. Agnes was a star that blazed so brightly that the light she left in the hearts of all whom she touched still remains. I am grateful I had the gift of her friendship and mentorship. We will all continue the good work that she has started, but she will be missed very much.

Images courtesy of Dr Hu Pei Lin and Dr Farah Safdar Husain

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