

# Tobacco-Free Generation: *an interview with Dr Koong Heng Nung and Dr Lynn Ong*

Interviewed by Dr Aziz Noordin, Family Physician, Editorial Team Member (Team B)

Over the decades, family medicine as part of the larger healthcare fraternity has been tackling smoking cessation from a disease management and behaviour change model.

Tobacco-Free Generation (TFG) is a concept started from Singapore in 2010. It was first presented to the global audience at the 2012 World Conference on Tobacco or Health held in Suntec City. This has blossomed into a social movement based on an ideology to phase out tobacco products from a particular generation as defined by those born in and after a predefined birth-year. TFG works with the youth to achieve zero smoking incidence through inspiring tobacco prevention education and youth leadership.



Dr Koong Heng Nung (second from left) and Dr Lynn Ong (fourth from left) at the African Capital Cities Sustainability Forum 2018.

As recently as Dec 2021, New Zealand proposed raising the legal smoking age by one year every year, effectively banning the sale of tobacco to people born after 2008. Similar legislation has been rolled out in Brookline, United States of America and Balanga City in Bataan, Philippines where these two jurisdictions have TFG law prohibiting the use of cigarettes to those born in and after the year 2000.

Smoking has been a leading cause of lung cancer, strongly correlated with coronary heart disease, stroke and lung disease such as COPD. Smoking increase pregnancy complications

The addictive nature of nicotine within tobacco products fuels the continued use of these products. Locally we have 6 Singaporeans who die prematurely from smoking-related illness each day, with the social cost of smoking in the range of 700 to 840 million dollars in 1997. That was 25 years ago; the cost is likely much higher now.

College Mirror was able to speak with Dr Koong Heng Nung, a thoracic surgeon in private practice and Dr Lynn Ong, a Family Medicine Resident on their involvement in this movement which they helped to start a decade ago.

## College Mirror (CM):

What is TFG?

## Dr Koong Heng Nung (KHN):

Tobacco-Free Generation TFG is a social advocacy that is increasingly being adopted across various parts of the world as it is actionable and appealing in contrast to punitive measures and fear mongering. More importantly, it sends a consistent message that smoking and vaping are harmful at whatever age.

## Dr Lynn Ong (LO):

It's a social advocacy journey that mobilises youth, smokers, non-smokers, and the entire community. We have been able to encourage youths to make their own decision not to pick up smoking. From our experience, our teaching content even inspires those already smoking to stop.

## KHN:

From my experience, an adult family member speaking to an addicted family member to stop smoking is never as effective as their children telling their smoking parent to stop when conveyed with sensitivity, love and care. So, our key focus is to teach these youths the right words and sensitivity, just as how we doctors are sensitive to breaking bad news. This has a more profound impact and better appeal in effecting change.

## CM:

Why TFG? Why a change in perspective?

## LO:

Current framework by WHO, anti-tobacco laws, decreases tobacco usage incidence. Nevertheless, we notice a plateau in decrease, especially when new devices are present, like e-cigarettes. Having presented TFG at Abu Dhabi in 2015, South Africa in 2018 and Malaysia in 2019, I worked with

local youths, who contextualised TFG knowledge to their local language to teach their peers better. This is much more invigorating than smoking cessation counselling. In my work as a doctor, I have seen patients suffering from smoking-related diseases, many of whom attempted but failed abstinence multiple times.

## KHN:

For years, we have trodden the same approach, such as health promotion boards globally following WHO's framework. After my 2010 paper written with Deborah Khoo, Yvonne Chiam, Priscilla Ng and AJ Berrick, titled Phasing-out tobacco: proposal to deny access to tobacco for those born from 2000, was published and was well received by adults, youths, smokers, and non-smokers worldwide, TFG gained traction.

## CM:

What made you decide to get involved in TFG?

## LO:

As a medical student, I wanted to do good, and I am still on that journey. I also had a grandpa who was smoking, and there was much tension in the family when getting him to quit smoking. I joined TFG in 2013 as a medical student, organising youth summits in Singapore. I experienced empowerment and fulfilment. The youths' passion and enthusiasm inspired me.

## KHN:

After my HMDP, I wanted to increase awareness on lung cancer and as part of that, wanted patients to go smoke-free. Thereafter, I published a paper showing that up to 60 percent of smokers even supported the idea. Although it often seems like a radical idea at first impression, people who dwell deeper and have a good grasp of the complex, revolving conundrums in tobacco control become strong

supporters. They even champion this approach in their own communities.

## CM:

What are the benefits of TFG?

## LO:

The benefits of TFG is that it mobilises the youth to engage their larger community to promote the common TFG principles so that an entire new generation can become free from the ravages of smoking and vaping. Moreover, it is beyond borders. It is self-sustaining, and each generation uses its own lingo to reach out to their peers. The ultimate outcome is achieving no new smokers in our future generation.

## KHN:

Intangible benefits include showcasing the soft power of Singapore advocacy in leading such movements and, as a spill over effect, can promote other social causes, where youth drive the change.

## CM:

What is your hope for TFG, and how can one help?

## KHN:

Interested supporters are encouraged to organise themselves with their friends and colleagues in groups of between 6-10 to attend Zoom presentation cum Q&A session. These can be organised any time after you email your details to us. Our experience is that youths can become very eloquent advocates for TFG. We are confident that you will find your time meaningfully invested as you are fighting for the lives and health of our future generations. Equally important, together, we will bring down health care costs by prevention.

■ CM

## Venturing into Australia

by Dr Charity Low Cheng Hong, Family Physician, Editorial Team Member (Team B)

The "Land Down Under" is amazing for a number of reasons. The country endowed with natural wonders and beaches, filled with wineries and agriculture, koalas and kangaroos; the nation with the highest skin cancer rates, ... and the highest job satisfaction rate for doctors in the world! I am privileged to have a glimpse of these as I venture forth!

In Feb 2021, I brought my family over to Australia to be with my elder son who had enrolled into UWA. In this time of COVID, travel is restricted. Hurdle after hurdle had to be cleared – application for ECMFG, AMC, work visa, exemption letter, negative swab, G2G application. We had to ensure two weeks of hotel quarantine and two negative

swabs before being set free with a hearty letter of Welcome to Australia!

International Medical Graduates (IMG) such as me are assigned to Priority District Areas (PDA) for work. The PDA maps is re-drawn yearly. I have obtained a job in Mundaring area. What followed was application for Provider number, Prescriber number, PRODA account... I recollected that when I was taking the MMed (Family Medicine) examination of the College of Singapore Family Physician, our local laboured to secure the presence of Australia Professors as external examiners to assess the standard of our candidates. This was done for consecutive years before

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