

Family Medicine in Humanitarian Missions: *Travel Not to Level the Gravel, but Unravel the Biopsychosocial Tangle*

by Dr Wong Wei Teen, Clinic Director, SHP Outram

When Supertyphoon Haiyan (a.k.a. Yolanda, Nov 2013) hit the Philippines Region 8, and a call was activated by Cru Singapore for healthcare personnel to volunteer medical support, I felt convicted to go, though I had not been at the frontline of crisis relief missions, and lend hands and feet to those who were victims of the natural disaster. The team was new – one doctor, three nurses, and one musician; we only met for the first time at the airport, but a common faith and purpose united us to serve together in a zone devastated by the storm surge, leaving countless homeless, and many lives lost. Our medical and nursing skills were put to good use as we tended to not only physical ailments, but also emotional needs of loss and despair. While crisis response in immediate and short-term aftermath is essential, the longer-term rehabilitation made a deeper impact, as I went on to lead many other Project HoPe teams from that point, to support geographically disadvantaged rural communities for medical and psychosocial care, including livelihood projects, in partnership with our local coordinator through to 2019. There was a momentum built, and appreciation for the many who came alongside to give their time, thought, talent, and treasure. This continued, with grit... then took a hard hit.



A school designated as evacuation centre that was hit by a storm surge. Twenty students and one teacher lost their lives.



Tending to a young child in the open area of a barangay (village, Tagalog).



Disbursing chicks to family units for rearing as a livelihood..

The COVID-19 pandemic pandemonium put a halt to this venture by freezing borders. A planned return to one of the far-flung rebel-infested zones in March 2020 had to be painfully abandoned. But while COVID struck many a broken chord into our system, the cords of natural disasters continued to rage beyond our borders. The Philippines continued to face onslaughts of typhoons, and a call came for supporting victims of Typhoon Odette (a.k.a. Typhoon Rai, Dec 2021) – those who lost homes and livelihoods. Closed borders did not mean closed hearts, however. While we were “grounded” in Singapore, our field coordinator in the Philippines continued the groundwork to coordinate relief and support. Old teammates, friends, and the SingHealth FM Residency Global Health Initiative Team Nov 2019 came forward to give and raise funds for raw materials for re-roofing and for fisherfolks to rebuild fishing boats for their livelihoods. In October 2022, I had the opportunity to return to visit and encourage these communities, as we handed over the fishing boats and provided medical care. Project HoPe has since provided medical support in October 2022 to other barangays in the same municipality. I look forward to continued care of the underserved communities, through direct care and equipping the local community with skills and resource.



Handing over the fishing boats built by the fisherfolk from the donated raw materials and engines.



Beneficiaries of zinc roofing, a collaboration between local government unit, SingHealth FM Residency Global Health Initiative team, and Project HoPe.

“Doc Teen” is how different communities call me when I serve their kababayan (countrymen, Tagalog). I am as much a fellow human being as anyone, and a continually-being-refined output of Family Medicine (FM) Residency training since 2011. FM was a deliberate choice of clarity to be enabled to serve in zones of significant socioeconomic disparity, because it takes the broad application of effective primary care to support needs in global health systems worldwide. I am thankful for the learning journeys and opportunities for growing in the primary care space beyond Singapore. In a space of a different culture and language, breaking down barriers comes with acknowledging that our occupation is not our preoccupation – flex to be in any role through generous giving of head, hand, and heart.

“ The team was new – one doctor, three nurses, and one musician; we only met for the first time at the airport, but a common faith and purpose united us to serve together in a zone devastated by the storm surge, leaving countless homeless, and many lives lost.”



A boy we performed I&D on his “pigsá” (infected cyst, Tagalog).

Having come through many medical mission experiences, testing my physical, emotional, and mental strength, I can say with confidence how blessed I am for the privilege to be a human being supporting a fellow human being, in recognising my shared humanity in humility, and valuing the extraordinary moments in the ordinary.

“ I am thankful for the learning journeys and opportunities for growing in the primary care space beyond Singapore.”

■ CM



COLLEGE OF
FAMILY PHYSICIANS
SINGAPORE

**FAMILY MEDICINE
COMMENCEMENT
CEREMONY 2023**

✿

**COLLEGE
52nd AGM**

**29 July 2023 (Saturday)
2.00pm**

Academia Auditorium
20 College Road, Singapore 169856

**Family Medicine
Commencement Ceremony 2023**
2.00 - 3.00pm ♦ Auditorium

~

Tea Reception
3.00 - 4.00pm ♦ Foyer

~

College 52nd AGM
4.00pm ♦ Auditorium