

## *My First Encounter With Palliative Care and PPCS*

I was incredibly overwhelmed by gratefulness when my emails were replied first by Dr. Ednin Hamzah and later by Dr. Saunthari both referring me to the PERAK PALLIATIVE CARE SOCIETY to pursue my interest in care giving and the associated services provided to terminally ill cancer patients.

There was a time when I did not even know what words like prognosis, palliative, carcinoma and metastasis meant. My first encounter of the world of the dreaded C was when my husband experienced pain which he assumed was due to sports injury from badminton while we were in Ireland. Our GP had briefly voiced his concern over the x-ray result and advised my husband to get a chest x-ray as well without further delay. This was when I came across the words lesion and mass and to make a long story short, after undergoing a biopsy at the Waterford Regional Hospital in Ireland, my husband was confirmed to be at stage 4 with Non Small Cell Lung Cancer which had metastasized to the left hip bone and right eye, thus the word lesion and mass. The latter behind his right eye had rendered my husband blind in a very short period.

The dates 7th December 2009 and 21st March 2010 will always remain significant and unforgettable, as these were dates when my husband was first hospitalised, leading to treatments and finally drawing his last breath. It devastates me at the thought of how cancer had ravaged my husband's perfect physic to skin and bones in such a short span. In the midst of the torment, I came to deeply value the word palliative when pain was wonderfully managed for my very sick husband, keeping him as comfortable as possible despite breakthrough pain.

As I had cared for my husband throughout his battle during that short duration, I watched and learnt as the

palliative team there came into our life and took care of us as a couple and taught me all I needed to know to mind him. During this time, my husband had commented on how courteously we were treated and that I had learned well from them to care. This encouraged me to be involved in palliative care when I returned home to Malaysia. And I did just that. I was most honored and privileged to be welcomed into the family of PPCS and attended my first workshop with the team in Cameron Highlands where we had wonderful fellowship and brilliant ice breaking sessions.

The 1st workshop conducted by Datin Judy Yap on teamwork simply emphasized that when a group of people come together as WE instead of I or ME, the objective of teamwork would be met. I personally liked the saying UBUNTU by Nelson Mandela – I AM BECAUSE WE ARE.

The 2nd workshop conducted by Dr. Boon was on communication. Words are extremely potent either way it is being said. Dr. Boon made us aware of how mere words can make such vast difference to a patient and family facing a terminal ordeal. It dawned on all of us how careful we should be in communication and that listening is essential. We may not be able to understand exactly what a patient or the family undergoes, but nevertheless, if we are willing to lend a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on or a simple touch or hug, this brings about a silent compassion that may perhaps elevate the terrible pain.

**Chandrika P Choo**  
Trainee Volunteer



**ERRATA:** Please note that in the previous issue of PPCS Centre News, 'Sunshine Hour at Pantai Hospital' should read 'Sunshine Hour by Pantai Hospital'.

**ROYAL PATRON:**

Duli Yang Teramat Mulia Raja Muda Perak Darul Ridzuan, Raja Dr Nazrin Shah Ibni Sultan Azlan Muhibuddin Shah

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## PPCS TEAM BUILDING WORKSHOP FOR VOLUNTEERS & STAFF

21 – 22nd AUGUST 2010  
CHEFOO CENTRE, CAMERON HIGHLANDS

## 3-Month Attachment Programme AT PERAK PALLIATIVE CARE SOCIETY

I had prepared myself for an attachment two semesters beforehand but despite all the information at my fingertips and calling up various agencies, nothing seemed right as most of them were too far away from home. I prayed but left no decision in God's hands.

It was during the peak of my anxiety and with one week left to confirm my placement that Perak Palliative Care Society (PPCS) struck my mind. I recalled the invitation to become a volunteer of the society two years back when I first started my course. Not knowing my fate then, I supposed the road has been paved from the very beginning.

I knew next to nothing about palliative care and nursing terminally ill patients. To me, medical terms and abbreviations were just as strange as advanced mathematical formulae. It is altogether a very different field from what I had been in for the past two years. What I had in hand was my Sixth Form knowledge of Biology, some applicable psychological theories and the World Wide Web.

First day at work was like tracking a jungle without a map. All those strange medical jargon and abbreviations were incomprehensible to me. I could not understand the content of conversations even though it was in English during the nurses' briefing. Luckily, the Palliative Care Nurses were willing to explain to me when I asked them. Subsequently, I began to understand their language although I still feel like I was tracking into unknown jungles at times.

For the first six weeks, my role was to observe and learn. It has been a most humbling experience to sit and do nothing but observe. There, I see poverty, suffering, pain, dying and death. But through observing the process

of dying, I learnt about living. Through observing deaths, I learnt to appreciate lives. Above all, I learnt that I am very blessed! It has embarked me on a journey towards self as well as spiritual development.

On week 7 and 11, I was attached to the Medical Social Work Unit in Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun. Still, my role was to observe and learn. I learnt how clients were interviewed and evaluated on different aspects when they apply for financial aid. I learnt to handle cases at the counter and saw cases I never thought would really happen. With first-hand account of these incidents, I could not deny that cases of incest, rape and of drinks being spiked by friends in a bar really do happen.

My attachment extended to Rumah Seri Kenangan (RSK) Ulu Kinta during weeks 8, 9 and 12. Here, I am tested spiritually and mentally, cognitively and emotionally. It was interesting to meet different types of individuals. From them, I learnt humility and patience – two virtues that I am always lacking in. Some counselling skills were put into practice but time was too short to see the therapeutic effects. However, it has enabled me to gauge my counselling skills.

As serious as I can be when it comes to work and achievements, I tend to lose sight of many other important things in life in the midst of competing in this materialistic world. At the end of 14 weeks, seeing things as it is with terminally ill patients made me ponder on things that are of utmost importance in life.

Michelle Lee



## Donation from Henkel (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd

PPCS would like to acknowledge its thanks to Henkel (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd for the donation of 2 units of oxygen concentrator and 1 unit of HomeFill Oxygen.

From left:  
Sumathy, Nancy,  
Hui Yi and Mr Ng  
Foo Leng, Project  
Manager of Henkel  
(Malaysia) Sdn Bhd



Lin Hui Yi  
presenting a  
token of thanks to  
Mr Ng Foo Leng

## Profiles in Courage

### Jane Oon: Fighting cancer with family and faith

Jane Oon is sixty-seven years old and a cancer survivor. But nothing in her calm, thoughtful demeanor hints at the physical and emotional turmoil she has undergone in the last two years.

Jane was born and raised in Penang, but moved to Ipoh in 1991 at her younger sister Linda's urging. At the time, Jane, who has never been married, had retired from her clerical career to look after her father, a victim of Alzheimer's. Ipoh also seemed like a more salubrious location for retirement. "We were living near Sungai Rambai in Bukit Mertajam, so our house was often flooded when it rained," said Jane. "My sister was a retired teacher in Ipoh, and we found a house here with her help."



Jane Oon

Even before she was diagnosed with rectal cancer, Jane was already familiar with the disease as her father was stricken with prostate cancer in 1997. Jane, however, had always been very careful about her health. As a member of the Perak Senior Citizens' Club, she was an enthusiastic participant in their activities, especially social gatherings and walks.

In December 2008, the tables were turned against Jane, the Oon family caregiver, when she unexpectedly found herself in the role of a patient. She began experiencing difficulties in passing motion. "I either had constipation or diarrhoea, and I sometimes went to the toilet ten to twenty times a day with little relief," she said. That set off alarm bells for Jane, so she went for a checkup at Fatimah Hospital.

As private healthcare was too costly for Jane, she was referred to the Ipoh General Hospital for a colonoscopy. The scope immediately revealed the cause of her ill health - a cancerous growth in her rectum. On 5 January, Jane underwent surgery to have her rectum removed and a colostomy bag installed. The following month she began a six-month course of chemotherapy.

According to Jane, the most difficult thing about cancer is the physical pain and the depression that ensued. But she found solace in two things - her Catholic faith and her family. "In order to face cancer, you need to be strong

and have faith," she said. "When I felt afraid, I prayed to Mother Mary for strength and said the rosary. That helped to calm me down."

Her family also played a vital role in her recovery. Jane's two younger siblings, Linda in Ipoh and a brother in Sydney, Australia, visited her frequently and their support, which continued even after her illness, made her feel cared for. This October, her brother will take her on a trip to Japan, which she greatly looks forward to.

Jane came to the Perak Palliative Care Society (PPCS) in August 2009 through Pauline Khoo, a mutual acquaintance of hers and PPCS volunteer coordinator Guddi Roy's. Jane was initially a home care patient under PPCS nurse Wong Shau Mun. "Miss Wong was a huge source of comfort," said Jane. "She arranged for me to collect a monthly welfare cheque that I didn't know I was entitled to, which was a great help to me as I'm a retired single woman."

Today, Jane's cancer is in remission, but she has become a regular at PPCS events like the society's monthly Sunshine Hour and the weekly patchwork class with Linda Kong. "I never miss a class if I can help it," said Jane with a smile. "The nurses joke that I'm half patient, half volunteer."

This isn't to say that cancer hasn't left a mark on Jane. While her life is mostly back to normal, she admitted that she is more fearful about traveling alone these days. "It didn't used to worry me in the slightest," she said. "But I don't think I could go anywhere without a travel companion now. I'm really glad that my brother's coming with me to Japan."

Nevertheless, Jane had this to say to other cancer patients: "You must come out and socialize with other people."

"Read more and educate yourself about your illness and diet, and don't ever give up."

*Jia-yi Loo*  
Volunteer

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\*imo = in memory of

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