

Making a difference

Raffles Medical's chief is also an avid volunteer, writes CHEN HUIFEN

LOO Choon Yong remembers his early days at Sana (Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association) very vividly still — after about a decade of work to rehabilitate drug addicts.

"When I first started this work, I was very depressed because eight out of 10 drug (heroin) addicts never recover," he said. "They relapsed. That was what our statistics showed. If you counselled them, still six out of 10 relapsed."

Fortunately, his faith in making a difference made him persevere. The executive chairman and co-founder of Raffles Medical Group held the belief that, going by what statistics indicated then, he could at the very least help keep 20 per cent more of the offenders off drugs. "You really learn to see the glass of water as half-filled, not half-empty," said the 56-year-old, who is also a vice-chairman of the National Council Against Drug Abuse.

Of course, with more refined methodologies and improved counselling programmes over the years, Sana has reduced the drug relapse cases to 30-40 per cent today. Having played his part in adding value to the organisation, Dr Loo has recently decided to step down as its president, a post he has held for nine years.

"Every organisation needs new blood to look at it differently," he said. "The drug scene is also evolving from one of heroin, to more designer drugs. And I think the approach needs to be reviewed, so it's good from time to time for a social organisation to have injection of new people and leadership."

That is not to say that he will be stopping his volunteer work for a while. As a matter of fact, the non-profit Asian Medical Foundation (AMF), an offspring of his hospital group, looks set to occupy him for some time. Registered in late 2003,

AMF was started by a group of doctors and nurses at Raffles Medical who wants to offer their expertise to poorer countries in the region that have little or no access to proper healthcare.

"Every year, we (Raffles Medical) adopt a charity... usually we try to look at those where they have special needs and we can try and leverage on our medical expertise," he said.

'If I can be of assistance to my neighbours, to my fellow Singaporeans in whatever way, I will do so.'

—Dr Loo

"Then one day, the professionals working here, the doctors, the nurses, the healthcare managers said, 'Well, Singapore is one of the better-off countries in the region. Why don't we use our skills, expertise, experience and a little bit of our money to help the less fortunate in the region?'"

The initial idea was to have an entity to organise medical volunteer work in Southeast Asia. He reckons that most Singaporeans are well looked after and have access to healthcare services, whether rich or poor. "But this is not the case in many countries, and then you count disasters. Every now and then you have the kind of disasters like tsunamis, earthquake, floods, and those disasters will suddenly strain the medical infrastructure of any country. If you are

able to mobilise people quickly, you can bring help quickly to where it's needed most."

Then, at about the time when the foundation was being realised came a request from Iran to separate twins Laleh and Ladan Bijani. So the scope there are many healthcare professionals, doctors, nurses who are very willing to serve, not only from Singapore but also from the region. And you can see from the recent tsunami disaster and Nias earthquake. Many people stepped forward," he noted.

Following the Dec 26 tsunami, Raffles Medical sent a team of two doctors and two nurses to Banda Aceh, who were joined in Indonesia by four doctors and three nurses under the AMF umbrella. It has also despatched \$25,000 worth of medical supplies and medications to Aceh. More recently, the foundation also sent a team to Nias to extend emergency medical assistance to the victims of the March 28 earthquake, joined again by some Indonesian doctors in Nias.

"The professionals can do so much, but they also need an organisation to quickly get the money, get the logistics organised, liaise with people and all that. And this is what AMF seeks to do. While we started in Singapore, we hope that it will truly be a regional organisation," he said.

Singapore volunteers

The AMF now has about 50 volunteers, drawn largely from the pool of medical practitioners in Singapore, with a small list of partners and contacts from Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand. It constantly receives requests for medical assistance from East Timor, Papua New Guinea and pockets of communities in developing countries around the region. For such cases, the AMF board will have to evaluate and verify the information before



Dr Loo: The non-profit Asian Medical Foundation looks set to occupy him for some time

deciding on the undertaking.

Looking ahead, the foundation is also planning to send *ad hoc* missions to overseas sites to train the locals in specific healthcare tasks, such as vaccinations, childcare, and perhaps even in proper delivery of babies.

For the longer term, Dr Loo also sees potential in turning the AMF into another *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (Doctors Without Borders), a private non-government international network which provides medical aid to populations suffering from diseases and neglect.

The man's involvement in social work stems from a belief in paying back to society. Growing up in the 1950s of Singapore, he knew what it was like to be poor and living in a chaotic, politically unstable environment. Peace and security should not be taken for granted and whatever ways he can contribute to make that sustainable, he will.

"If I can be of assistance to my neighbours, to my fellow Singaporeans in whatever way, I will do so,"

he said. "As the good book says, it's more fortunate to give than to receive, isn't it?"

If you are thinking that the man would be pretty much very busy with his professional and social duties, you'll be even more amazed at what other hats he wears.

Many hats

Dr Loo is also the deputy chairman of the Action Community for Entrepreneurship, a public-private collaboration to promote entrepreneurship in Singapore. And while he may have stepped down as the president of Sana, he is still on the board and participates in its monthly meetings. He is also a member of the board of trustees at the Singapore Management University and the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC). In addition, he sits on the Board of Governors for Raffles Junior College.

Early this year, he became a Nominated Member of Parliament. And in March, he triggered a debate when he called for the casino decision to be put

to a referendum. While he personally takes a neutral stance on the issue, he thought that putting it to a people's vote would be progress towards political maturation.

"Then we will learn to accept that we are a plural society, that we can persuade but if the rest don't come along, we must learn to accept and live peacefully with our neighbours. I think this is something that people who are vocal must also understand. So that is the reason why I thought the government should be prepared to consider (a referendum)."

Even as the interview draws to a close, one can't help but be inspired by the can-do spirit of the man. Despite being a corporate bigwig, he excludes none of the airs of someone at the top of the hierarchy. "We have only one life, might as well make the most of it," he extolled.

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