

Singapore Children's Society Deputy Chairman Prof Ho Lai Yun: Building a Safe Haven for Victims of Child Abuse

By Phoon Jing Ying (Shin Min Daily News, 9 May 2021)

Having felt completely helpless after witnessing abused children go in and out of hospital multiple times, Prof Ho Lai Yun, Deputy Chairman of the Singapore Children's Society, set about building a safe haven for neglected and abused children on his return from his studies overseas. When he remembers children who were unable to cope with their suffering and ended their lives, he laments the utter sadness he feels.

Prof Ho, 72, has worked in paediatric care for over 45 years, and is currently Senior Consultant and Advisor of the Department of Child Development at KK Women's and Children's Hospital. But that's just one of the many hats he wears; he is also Emeritus Consultant and Clinician Mentor to the Department of Neonatal and Developmental Medicine of Singapore General Hospital (SGH), as well as Deputy Chairman of Singapore Children's Society.

Prof Ho's choice of paediatrics did not come about by coincidence, he revealed. It started with him following in the footsteps of his mentor. During his six-month internship in the paediatric department, he also came into contact with obstetrics and gynaecology, and gradually became used to working with children.

Even when he was interning at other medical departments, any cases involving children or youth were handed over to him, so it seemed natural for him to specialise in paediatrics.

He said from the time when he first came into contact with child abuse cases, to later on when he saw many abused children going in and out of hospital, he had felt helpless.

"At the time, even though we knew that there was a problem, we didn't know what to do, because the problem was too big."

It wasn't until his fellowship at SickKids, the Hospital for Sick Children, in Toronto, Canada, where a special department had been set up within the emergency room to help and protect the rights of children in cases where abuse or neglect was suspected, that he saw how to go about helping.

On his return to Singapore, he participated in the review on the protection of abused and neglected children in 1985 – it was the first time data had been collected on the subject. A report was formally submitted in 1987, and a series of programmes to help child victims was launched in partnership with the government. Singapore Children's Society (SCS) was among the organisations involved at the time.

"Charities and non-governmental organisations have to deal with not only the issues of public education and legal protection, but also programme rollouts within the community."

Sunbeam Place was set up by SCS with this aim. Like its name implies, it is a sanctuary for children who have suffered abuse or neglect, a place where their lives can be brightened. Many of the children gradually emerge from the hurt and pain they suffered. After becoming adults and building their own families, they still return for visits and to take the children in the home out on excursions and trips.

In spite of the successful cases, there are still instances of children who have not been able to recover from the damage inflicted that Prof Ho finds heart breaking. He recalled a child with a very pleasant personality who had suffered parental abuse and had stayed at the home from a young age.

After completing secondary school, the home had judged that the child could gradually return to his birth family; but then came the shocking news that he had chosen to end his life. Prof Ho said, oftentimes, the children may seem fine on the surface, but they have in actual fact yet to recover from the psychological hurt.

SCS came to realise that it was necessary to go to the root of the issue in trying to resolve the problem, and worked to improve the education of children and their parents, launching courses and education programmes to prevent child abuse.

Children's Problems are Changing with the Times

Prof Ho pointed out that children can suffer from physical or psychological hurt, and as times change, the problems they face will also change – a notable example would be cyber bullying.

His team is currently working on teaching pre-schoolers how to identify sexual abuse. Prof Ho said teaching children to tell when physical contact is inappropriate will enable them to alert their parents when the problem occurs.

He said many parents have objected, as they think children should not be exposed to sex education unnecessarily at a young age. Prof Ho, however, feels protecting children should take priority, but things can only be done one step at a time to achieve gradual improvement.