

NEWS

WINNER OF MILK AWARD

Pay what you can afford

Doctor moves to low-income neighbourhood to help poor

By Genevieve Jiang
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His bills were mounting. He had bank loans and other debts to worry about.

But the young doctor would charge some of his patients a minimal fee of just \$5. And some he even treated for free.

The year was 1996. Dr Tan Poh Kiang, then 30, had left a \$5,000-job at a clinic to set up his own practice at Bukit Ho Swee, a neighbourhood made up mostly of low-income families.

His reason: To "help the needy".

"I came up with a 'pay as you can afford scheme'," recalled Dr Tan. "Those who claimed they couldn't afford it I charged \$5. Sometimes, some people said they couldn't pay at all, so I charged them nothing."

Dr Tan still charges his needy

patients minimal fees, and sometimes, nothing at all.

He was given the Humanitarian Volunteer of the Year Award by The MILK (Mainly I Love Kids) Fund yesterday. (See report, right.)

But the early days for Dr Tan were tough.

On top of worrying about his loans and debts, he also found it hard separating the genuine cases from those who simply wanted free treatment.

"After a while, I started noticing patients who came in with fancy watches and jewellery who claimed that they couldn't afford the fees.

"But there was little I could do but take their word for it. I gave them the benefit of the doubt."

Dr Tan said he did not pay close attention to his accounts in the early days, and could not say how much pay he took home.



PHOTO: KAYLIN CHAN

I grew up in a one-room rental flat in Toa Payoh so I have a clear idea of what it's like to be poor.

— Dr Tan (above with wife Ching Lie Joan) holding the award

Heard of MILK or human kindness?

◆ MILK (Mainly I Love Kids) reaches out to disadvantaged kids & youths from low-income families. The fund supports programmes that help break the cycle which they circumstances might otherwise destine them to.

Milk supports needy children who suffer from treatable illnesses, provides a learning foundation for kids from disadvantaged homes, gives guidance to reduce delinquency, supports teens in crisis, backs work aimed at helping poor children in the region.

The Milk Awards were presented by President S R Nathan yesterday at the Shangri La.

The outstanding child and youth worker award was given to Dr Tan Lai Yong, 44, clinical lecturer at the Kunming Medical Centre, for improving the healthcare of children in the villages of Yunnan, China.

Child on Street 11 was named outstanding voluntary welfare organisation of the year award, for helping children from low-income families.

Two special humanitarian awards were given to Mr David T Bussa and Mrs Kirsty Sword-Gusmao.

WORRIED AT THE START

But he described his financial situation then as "dire".

Dr Tan is married with two daughters, aged one and five.

His wife was also involved in helping him to start the clinic. He said she was "a little worried" at the start but supportive of his cause.

Said Dr Tan: "Although it was hard at the start, I had no regrets. I grew up in a one-room rental flat in Toa Payoh so I have a clear idea of what it's like to be poor."

"I was lucky that my parents, despite their tight situation, still managed to save and put me through medical school. I wanted to give something back to the community."

A friend advised him to seek the help of welfare groups in the neighbourhood to avoid being cheated.

So Dr Tan approached social workers at Beyond Social Services.

Whenever he could, he would attend staff meetings at the centre to understand how social workers handled troubled and needy families.

Social workers also agreed to refer him their cases.

Over the years, he has handled hundreds of needy patients, and each left an indelible mark.

But one case that moved him the most was that of a woman in her late 20s, who was abandoned by her husband last year.

She was left alone to care for their four young children, aged two to six.

Said Dr Tan: "The husband had basically walked out on the family. But he would occasionally return and demand sex from his wife."

"She was unable to work because of the children, so she was literally living on handouts and welfare."

"Three out of the four kids had asthma, so you can imagine how tough

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