

We salute you, not only you are SJAM, National Staff Officer (Admin), but, your kind and sincere in service for mankind! Your bravery in donating your liver to save someone's live impressed many in the society, and was reported in local newspaper recently. Today, a life of a 13 years old girl has been saved because of you. You make us proud, as a volunteer of St. John Ambulance of Malaysia (SJAM), you demonstrated the greatest in service for mankind.

Responder Penang managed to catch up with Ms. Chew Hoong Ling, to discover the story behind "A Stranger, A Benefactress"

CorResponder: Thanks for accept our invitation to conduct this simple online interview, and once again, we salute your kind and bravery, helping to save a life of a poor girl, by donating part of your liver to her, truly the Service of Mankind!

Lets start out casual, mind to tell us more about yourself?

As far as we are concern, you are SJAM National Staff Officer (Admin), and involved in other voluntary organizations as well. And, you posses a superb skills in chairing an event and television programme as well as an emcee.

Hoong Ling: When I was still a student, I was already very actively involved in community service activities. I do not believe in getting rich before you can serve. As a student activist, I was invited to Bicara Siswa talk show live on RTM1. After 2 eye-opening presentations with fluent spoken Malay, RTM invited me to host Selamat Pagi Malaysia talk show where I served for 2 years.

In year 2003, I was hand picked by the Malaysia government to be the Youth Ambassador on board the Ship for Southeast Asian Youths Programme and when in Manila, I met Butch Albarrachin, the Chairman and Founder of the Philippines National Hosting and Emceeing Association. With him, I got a book "Hosting and Emceeing" which was my guru since then.

As far as St. John Ambulance is concerned, I was a St. John member since school days. It was fate that I join St. John because my strict guardians (I stayed with my aunt and uncle since my parents divorced when I was 4 years old) would not allow me to join activities in school. Nevertheless my persistence and perseverance convinced them.

Community service is in my blood and I feel joy and happiness by serving others. Helping others lift my mood, saving others alleviate my life.

CorResponder: We read from news that, you donated 60% of your liver to a girl who suffered from liver cancer, it was when and how the things go actually ?

What your family reaction ? Do you having any difficulty to convince them?

Hoong Ling: It was in November 2008 when I received an email that someone needed liver. I called the person in the email and found out that they are still looking. As my blood group matches, I decided to give it a try. Little did I thought that my liver matches. Now, the decision is tough when my mom and friends strongly objected the idea of donating my liver.

I started to doubt my decision but having spoken to a close friend, he said, "Being able to donate your liver to someone is a fate. Is not easy and is not something that you can simply just do. It is a good thing to do and you should do it! However, should there be any consequences later, please do not blame this decision to donate the organ. It is your decision and you should accept whatever comes."

With his words, I decided that I should go for it and from then onwards, all negative words fall to deaf ears. I have made the decision and is firm. I also convinced my mother and she also accepted it. I have asked her to think about it and imagine if I am the person needing a liver and is her turn now looking for a donor. She finally understood. I also told her that the operation may be done in December 2008 which is my birthday month so this could be my best birthday present – to save someone's life.

My father, just like ever, always support my decision. I can see he was taken aback at first but he accepted very quickly. Organ donation is not a new topic in my life. I have always been promoting organ donation, organized organ donation campaigns and even sign the pledge forms to donate organs after death as early as age 13. I donate blood as early as age 17 and all my family members know my cause.

CorResponder: Any preparation needed before you donate your liver?

Hoong Ling: Having the decision made and initial medical results shown OK, I then arranged for another thorough test to be done in Singapore. In December 2008, I met An Qi – she was actually a family friend. His father knows my father and therefore the news are exaggerating a lot.

An Qi's family and I went to Singapore for 10 days for a full, complete tests. Blood tests, urine tests, CT scan, X-Ray and doctor's consultations were all done. Although I have had many blood donation sessions, never in my life I have so many tubes and needles penetrating my body in a span of few months. The CT scan made me suffered excruciating pain which made me wanted to give up my decision but then since my decision was firm, I think no more to overturn that decision made.

The operation was done in Gleneagles Hospital in Dato' Dr. K. C. Tan's clinic. Dato' Dr. K.C. Tan is a Malaysian and an expert in living donor liver transplant.

The operation was set on the 2nd January 2009 but due to the blood bank not having enough blood for standby, the operation date was postponed to 12th January 2009. However, I was sick so it was further postponed to 14th January 2009. My mom joked that I was sick because of pre-operation anxiety and fear.

I felt afraid, too but I can't show it. How can I be developing fear when my intention is to save a 13-year old girl? I must be strong and show her that everything will be fine.

The day before the operation, we are already hospitalized. My mom and aunt came all the way from Ipoh to accompany me. I must say it really helps to reduce the unknown stress. Although I acted courageous, I knew deep inside, I was really worried, too.

Now I knew the importance of visiting a friend in hospital. I never thought all these moral support helps until I experienced it myself. This is the first time I am admitted to the hospital.

On the first day, there were a series of briefings. The nurse came to have orientation and showed us the ICU rooms, the wards and introduced a few nurses on duty. Then the anesthetic doctor came to brief and inform about the anesthesia used. Later on Dato' Dr. K. C. Tan came with Dr. Lee Kang Hoe and briefed us on the operations.

He mentioned that An Qi will be going in the operation theatre first and then operated to ensure the cancer cells do not spread to other parts of the organs. He warned that if the cells spread, then the transplant will not be carried on, although the chance of this is very very low. Although it was his duty to inform us, An Qi's parents were visibly very worried.

Next I also had the physiotherapist visit me to brief me on breathing exercise and how to cough after the operation. The breathing exercise comes with an apparatus which indicates your breathing strength as well as the depth of breath. With the normal breathing strength, I was able to make it to the 2,200 mark just like a normal person at my age and weight would.

Another pain management consultant also came to inform me on the usage of morphine in my pain management after operation. I will be given a button to press where the morphine will be injected to my neck through the tubes. The device has a timer and will not allow overdose of morphine injected.

After all done, my mom suddenly felt so bored and asked if I would like to go shopping. I immediately said yes and applied leave from the doctor to allow me go shopping. The short but helpful shopping session helped to ease my stress and made me sleep well that night.

The next morning I was awake right at 6.30am and took bath. My mom, aunt and An Qi's aunts also came to greet me good morning. At about 8.30am an attendant came with a trolley to push me to the operation theatre. My heart was beating fast but with my mom and aunt there chit chatting with me, it relieved the fear.

At about 10.00am I was pushed to the operating theatre where it was so cold that I shivered. I am very sure I shivered because is cold, not due to fear. The doctor injected the anesthesia and I was asleep.

When someone woke me up, all I knew what the pain management device button was placed on my right hand. The pain was greatly felt so all I knew was to press the button again and again. I saw my mom and aunt on the left and the first words I spoke, "Is very cold!" Warm

blankets were brought to me and I was pushed to the ICU.

I slept the whole night and when I was awake, I can see the dedicated nurse right at the window outside. As I moved, the nurse came in to talk to me. I had tubes all over me!

The neck had a tube which separates to 4 different tubes for medicine, morphine (pain management) and drips. The urine bag connected. In between the hip and my abdomen on the right was another tube to remove blood and discharge from my body. I also had oxygen tubes attached and another tube to my stomach from my right nose. Then I have something penetrating my left wrist which checked on my blood pressure every hour. Another clip was clipped to my finger to check on my oxygen level. My left hand has a nurse call button and right hand equipped with the morphine release button. I felt like a robot with tubes everywhere and buttons to control right at both hands!

On the third day, I eagerly wanted to leave the ICU and transferred to normal ward. I was hospitalized for a total of 7 days.

They have me sit up, walk, help me cough and most of the time, I slept.

After discharged, I was flown back to KL and immediately went to Teluk Intan to prepare Chinese New Year celebrations! The rest... is history !

CorResponder: The girl is a stranger to you, what makes up your mind to donate part of your liver to her? Did you ever met the girl so far?

Hoong Ling: Met a few times because his father knew my father but we never really get closer until now. The world is so small.

Since I am an organ donation activist, when I signed the pledge form to donate all my organs after death, it came across my mind that I will even do it when I am alive. So when the opportunity is here, the decision is really easy to make.

CorResponder: Is it your first time donating organ?

Hoong Ling: Yes this is the first time and I bet could be the last time while I am alive because during the tests only did I found out that I only have one kidney!

CorResponder: Besides kind and sincere, organ donation will needs a bravery from us, how you looking at the organ donation?

Hoong Ling: Well if you have passion to help others, all other obstacles are just sidelined. Just like our members having passion for St. John, parents advise sometimes fall to deaf ears. Serving others is my passion.

CorResponder: Recently, Singapore Parliament has passed a law to allow reimbursement for organ donations. Do you think this step will bring more pros or cons to the society? What say you?

Hoong Ling: I have met the committee who drafted this law and they managed to convince me why it is important. In fact, having to take leave from work for at least 2 months for recovery, is not easy. I thank XeerSoft for allowing me to take leave as well as giving me allowance even when I am on leave.

My company even allowed my colleagues to visit me in Singapore, with company car on company expenses. They paid me a surprise visit when I was in the hospital!

Having this allowance or reimbursement will encourage more people come forward to donate organs. In fact, if you look at the laws, the insurance does not cover me! This is a self-inflicted operation and if I die or if there are any complications occur later, I am not covered and I will need to fork out my own money to go through all the consequences. This fund (or reimbursement) will allow some "coverage" on the donor.

Is it time Malaysia government also pass the same.

CorResponder: There are cases that those poor families would have been involved in organ trading, in worst, involved in "black market", to get a sum of money from selling the organ, eg. Kidney. What's your view on this kind of cases?

Hoong Ling: You guys are better than newspaper reporters! You know the topic well and the issues related. This black market issue only occurs when the NEED is there and the SUPPLY is not there. High demand, low supply which leads to black market. Therefore, more people should come forward to donate organs and more people should pledge their organs. When the demand and supply issue is not significant, then black market will eventually be eliminated.

CorResponder: Lastly, any words to our readers, to motivate all our readers, especially the members of SJAM to contribute in these meaningful acts, organ donation.

Hoong Ling: Please consider seriously on pledging organs after death. Just like a car, when it may not serve the purpose well, it still has spare parts which can be reused. In Malaysia, all major religions support organ donation and there is no objection to this cause. For more information on organ donation, please visit <http://www.agiftoflife.gov.my/>