

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP: CHASING THE UNKNOWNNS



By Dr Amos Loh

Senior Consultant, Paediatric Surgery,
KK Women's and Children's Hospital
Chair, Philanthropy Committee, Surgery ACP

Dr Amos Loh is a pediatric surgeon with a strong passion in research. He shares his views on how research and philanthropy advances medicine.

MY YOUNG PATIENTS

The little girl was barely five years old. We had just removed a large tumour in her chest and she was being kept alive on cardiac bypass. She remained unconscious in the ICU while her devastated parents came to terms slowly with her condition.

A month later, as if she knew her parents were ready to let her go, she eventually passed away. I sometimes wonder if my young patients have more strength and courage than they were credited for.

I specialise in paediatric surgical oncology. It is a small field not many know about. Through my training and subsequent career, I have always wondered about all the "unknowns" in these catastrophic diseases that inflict young lives that have barely started.

Unlike adults who have had long exposure to external carcinogenic factors such as smoking and drinking, cancers in children are harder to explain. Why are certain genetic mutations linked to particular types of tumours? What can we do to improve patient outcome?

DOING LESS AND WORKING TOGETHER

There are many unknowns, yet new discoveries are being made all the time and standards constantly evolve. What was previously tried and tested could be inferior options today. Therefore, it behoves us to keep raising the bar.

In surgical oncology, improving surgical technique alone is insufficient. Previously, surgeons remove tumours and organs in radical surgeries that leave patients with a lifetime of morbidity.

At times, instead of doing more, we may hold back surgeries and fill the gap with tailored radiation and chemotherapy. This requires a willingness to learn outside our discipline, understand the other dimensions of patient care, and work together as a multidisciplinary team. If we see ourselves as different parts of the same team, we can then treat patients holistically and achieve better outcomes.

FINDING ANSWERS THROUGH RESEARCH

Clinicians, researchers and scientists play different but equally important roles in advancing medicine. To me, research is a way to find answers to improve clinical care. My interest in research is a natural extension of dealing with all the unknowns that present in my patients.

I chair the VIVA-KKH Paediatric Brain and Solid Tumour Programme which covers three pillars – clinical multidisciplinary care, translational research and data analysis.

One of the translational focuses of the Programme is molecular diagnostics. Molecular sub-grouping of paediatric tumours is one aspect with increasing importance in our field. With the home-grown research assays that we have since validated internationally and rolled out as clinical tests, we are now beginning to see patient impact in terms of faster and more accurate diagnoses.

PURSING RESPONSIBLE PHILANTHROPY

A lot of what we do in biomedical research is not economically driven. Philanthropy comes in to support causes that may not reap immediate economic returns, whether to fund academic research, humanitarian outreach or bring care to the underserved segments of society.

Contrary to typical views, I find that people in Singapore are willing to give, and give generously. But on our part, we must be responsible stewards of the funds to assure donors that their money is going to the right cause.

Every child deserves a chance in life. We cannot quantify the returns from spending thousands of dollars treating an ailing child. But that too is not how we value people.

This is where philanthropy fills the gaps, so that we can continue to raise the bar for better healthcare outcomes for our patients, be they young or old.