

May looks back to Sars calamity

Sydney Chinese Lion May Wong recounts her eye-opening return to her birthplace Hong Kong as a humanitarian scholarship recipient

At the end of last year, I was given the opportunity to undertake a two-month elective placement anywhere in the world and I chose my home of Hong Kong.

I swapped the sweltering Australian summer for tightly regulated, 4 degree Celsius research laboratories.

It was surreal stepping foot inside the laboratory where they discovered the SARS coronavirus in Hong Kong.

I was struck by the anecdotes that my supervisor, a patient and survivor of SARs, shared. He stated that the SARS calamity, which claimed 300 lives, was a double-edged sword. While it revealed the failings of the existing medical system with overcrowded wards and poorly ventilated hospitals, at the same time it saw Hong Kong become better prepared than any other country to combat another infectious disease epidemic.

My experience at Queen Mary Hospital, one of the largest acute regional hospitals, was an eye-opener. Despite being a developed country, Hong Kong citizens unfortunately do not experience the same calibre of health care that we receive in Australia.

In fact, the discrepancies between the public and



Lion May at work in the laboratory in Hong Kong (above) – and doctors in respirator masks and personal protective equipment (below) re-enact the testing times of the 2002 SARS epidemic.

private health sectors are quite large. Queen Mary Hospital provides general medical and surgical services to the residents of Western and Southern districts and is a tertiary referral centre for the whole territory of Hong Kong and beyond. Driven by

the high case loads (hepatitis clinics treated over 100 patients in one afternoon), the patient turnover is almost 20 times what a typical doctor would see in Australia.

As a medical student and the humanitarian scholar winner with Sydney Chinese Lions in 2011, I wanted to follow through with what the very scholarship was awarded for. During my attachment, I was involved with a larger team which looked at the recurrence of hepatitis B-related liver cancer, a disease which has a high morbidity and mortality and is more prevalent in Hong Kong.

I extended my efforts to a societal level. One of the major projects that I assisted in, in conjunction with other like-minded medical students, was the Heart-to-Heart Charity Walk. In its 12th year, the theme of "Heart-to-Heart, Be-a-Part" saw all participants walk in pairs with a bracelet binding them. This symbolised the shared feeling of care, tolerance and acceptance – a reflection of the sacrifice parents make for their sick children.

This reminded me of the Lion Purposes – to embrace bonds of friendship, good fellowship and mutual understanding. Situated at the Peak, one of Hong Kong's most scenic locations, it attracted over 2,500 participants and raised HK\$900,000. This money will go to research into cyanotic heart disease in children. I believe medical research directly translates into the social welfare of a community.



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