



# The Value of Chance:

## Poverty, Homelessness and Healthcare

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There are moments in life when we may have the chance to interact with a stranger, albeit for a very short, fleeting period of time. A stranger who, a second ago, knew nothing about you (and vice versa), could for that short moment succeeding it leave such a profound impression that you could not forget the encounter for days after. I had the chance to meet someone like that on one of the experiential learning journeys with my school.

### Stepping into an underprivileged community

It was the third day of a week-long programme, titled “Medicine for the Marginalised”, that brought first-year medical students from the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, such as myself, to various neighbourhoods in Singapore to learn about some of the social determinants of health. We were to report at Jalan Kukoh Food Centre just before sunset. As the sky darkened, it began to drizzle. I was hoping the rain would pass – our itinerary involved a whole evening of walking the stretch from the Jalan Kukoh neighbourhood to Chin Swee Avenue. From there, we would have dinner at Chinatown Food Centre before finishing our walk at Read Bridge. Located at the intersection of Chinatown, Clarke Quay and Outram Park, Jalan Kukoh is a vibrant neighbourhood comprising a few blocks of rental flats facing some of the most expensive, extravagant skyscrapers in Singapore. Just before I got off the car, the taxi driver asked me if I lived here. I told him I did not, and that it was my first time visiting the estate.

We set off toward the rental flats amid the faint drizzle. Puddles formed on some parts of the uneven ground as we traversed the corridors and stairs leading us to the basketball court at level four. The court was closed to the public when we visited due to COVID-19 safe-distancing regulations. The sky had already darkened when we made our way to Chin Swee Estate just across the street, where we passed by rows of alcoholic beverages displayed along the corridor in front of the Sheng Siong Supermarket at Block 52.

In front of the supermarket sat a stone pavilion. That December night, there were

a few people sitting under it, some with bags of groceries. At a corner sat a lady who was speaking loudly to a man seated beside her. The man appeared drunk. Curious, we approached them and introduced ourselves as medical students on a school trip walking around Jalan Kukoh to observe the sights and happenings there. The lady introduced herself as a volunteer. She lived in the vicinity and knew the elderly living in the area very well. She told us she was concerned about the man beside her who had injured his leg (one of his legs was encased in an orthopaedic cast made of white plaster) and his drinking habits. In a drunken state, the man did not seem to be listening to her. We asked her what we could do to help, in our capacity as students. Pointing at the stone benches situated right outside the air-conditioned entrance of the supermarket, the lady introduced us to another man seated on that same bench. He was homeless.

### A chance meeting

"The best thing you could do to help right now is to buy him a packet of rice", the lady told us. After we did, she introduced us to the homeless man (whom I will call Uncle from now). Uncle did not say much except to thank us for the meal. We lingered around the stone bench for a little while longer, before continuing our walk towards the food centre. I thought about Uncle on my train ride home. I wondered: we have bought him dinner today, but what will he eat tomorrow? On that note, I returned the next evening with a packet of rice. However, upon returning to the same stone bench, I could not find Uncle there. I explored the vicinity to no avail and eventually recruited the help of a staff member at the supermarket to pass the food to Uncle if she saw him.

I managed to find Uncle the next week, seated on the metal benches facing the badminton court. I introduced myself and took a seat next to him. He remembered me from the week before. I learnt that Uncle would sit outside the supermarket because it was cooler there, with the air-conditioning seeping out of the entrance. He would find a resting spot along the corridors of the

neighbouring blocks at night to sleep. I got to know that Uncle relied on food given free by the soup kitchen every Monday and Friday. From then on, I would bring Uncle water, bread, biscuits, fruits and a packet of chicken rice on Wednesdays.

I also learnt about his past: Uncle had been homeless for about three years. He quit his job as a cleaner the previous year as he had difficulty breathing when doing strenuous tasks, and relied on his savings to buy coffee and food for himself. He also depended on food from strangers. On one of the visits there, I met the volunteer lady again. She asked me if I could help Uncle find a place to stay.

I brought Uncle to the Social Service Office (SSO) at Kreta Ayer Community Club in late January. The social workers at SSO were very understanding of Uncle's situation and managed to find appropriate help for him. I felt grateful for their assistance and it made me happy to see Uncle have a safe and comfortable place to stay, a place to wash his clothes (he previously had to travel to East Coast Park to wash and dry his dirty laundry) and to cook meals. He also sought medical care, which was fully subsidised, to treat his chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

### Understanding privilege and chance

There are little things in life that I have taken for granted, like having a warm blanket and a soft mattress to sleep on every night. For people who live on the streets, they can only rely on a few pieces of clothing and cardboard to keep themselves warm against the unassuming cold concrete floor at night. This fateful experience humbled my perspective of what it means to care for others. Spending time with a stranger, while a seemingly small gesture, could really be the best thing one can do for someone in need. I sometimes think about what would have happened if I had not gone back to Chin Swee Avenue to visit Uncle, and how we would have remained strangers after buying him a packet of chicken rice. While my experience with Uncle seems to be a one-off chance encounter, I do

acknowledge that many things in life happen because we were there at the right place and the right time. And I am immensely grateful for this chance.

This chance encounter with Uncle also gave me an opportunity to realise the importance of a medical education that focuses on health as well as the humanities. The week-long programme organised by the medical school allowed me to experience first-hand how marginalised communities live on a day-to-day basis, the ways in which these communities find help from charities or governmental organisations and how healthcare plays an integral role in managing the holistic concerns of people in promoting their well-being. As a first-year medical student, it really was a privilege to be given the opportunity to learn about the social determinants of healthcare outside of clinical practice.

### A roll of the dice

I sat on a wooden bench beside Uncle, facing the building which housed the shelter, with the coconut tree providing us much needed shade from the glaring late-afternoon sun. Uncle shared with me what it was like to live at the shelter with the other residents. "One... two... three..." Uncle counted the rooms from the staircase on the left as he pointed a finger at his own room. "I stay there", he told me. And as the sun set, we talked about how our day went and arranged for our next meeting. It did not seem likely that we were merely strangers a few months ago, meeting for the first time at the stone benches outside the Sheng Shiong supermarket... ♦

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