



# MORE THAN JUST A Patient

Text by Dr Dong Xiaoke | Photos by Dr Dong Xiaoke and HealthServe

*“Beyond each patient was a person – with an entire family back home depending on him for their survival.”*  
– Dr Dong Xiaoke, volunteer doctor with HealthServe.

HealthServe has always been a familiar place to my wife Ann and I even when we were in medical school. We literally grew up listening to stories of overseas missionary doctors and those who actively served in the communities locally.

I began volunteering for HealthServe after starting work as a GP, with the belief that I needed to mindfully set aside some time to help a community in need. It was soon clear that the migrant workers’ community was one that I only had superficial contact with at work.

Initially, I imagined bringing knowledge from the care of community patients to HealthServe. I told myself that with all the community practice guidelines from the Ministry of Health at hand, nothing could possibly go wrong. I also held the idea that all the workers needed was free medicine. But it couldn’t be further from the truth.

One incident that left a deep impression was when a patient needed insulin

for diabetes and I prescribed it just as I usually would. Ten minutes later, the pharmacist came to me and explained that the patient did not have a fridge to store the insulin in, neither at work nor at home. I was left in shock, pondering the many things I took for granted that a typical patient in our local community would surely have – which may not be the case for our migrant brothers! Indeed, HealthServe also showed me that beyond each patient was a person – with an entire family back home depending on him for their survival.

Then along came 2020 and COVID-19, where the circuit breaker and movement restrictions across hospitals resulted in a shortage of volunteer doctors at HealthServe. It was then that Ann decided to help as well after seeing the lack of manpower. She was on sabbatical then and had no issues with the movement restrictions. Her first night volunteering for HealthServe was a trial-by-fire, where she was faced with a wave of patients with acute respiratory symptoms, anxious to know if they caught COVID-19. Several of them were confirmed positive for COVID-19 thereafter.

When Ann resumed clinical work, she continued to provide telehealth

consultations at HealthServe. Her experience has taught her that serving the migrant workers required a community and a team.

Over the past year, we have seen a variety of doctors including surgeons, neurologists and medical officers volunteering as GPs to provide much needed primary care for the migrant workers. All it takes to be prepared is the willingness to take time out and also understand the resources available. As much as Ann was at times bemused by the many issues brought up by the migrant brothers, she greatly enjoyed listening to their stories and tales.

As a family, both of us enjoyed our time helping out at HealthServe. We are also glad to be able to share our experience and stories from the migrant workers with our eight-year-old daughter who has always been curious about her parents’ work. She gets especially amused during our telehealth consultations, when she sees one parent beside her and another suddenly appearing on the other side of the screen to have some intense discussions! ♦

### Legend

1. Dr Dong in full personal protective equipment before the start of a clinic session at HealthServe
2. Dr Dong and Ann with their daughter



Dr Dong is a GP who enjoys nature walks and tending to his aquarium in his free time. When Ann is not teaching medical students, she practises in paediatric palliative medicine under Star Paediatric Advanced Life Support. She enjoys reading and relaxing by doing diamond dotting.