

Holding a Space

Text by Dr Tan Su-Ming

I was about to close for the day when my staff informed me that there was a new patient who wanted to see me.

It had been a long day and I was ready to pack up and go home, but I said “Okay,” as it was an elderly patient who complained of breathlessness. I soon established, after chatting with and examining her, that the cause of her breathlessness was emotional upset.

I asked her if she had high blood pressure and she replied that she had stopped taking her blood pressure medication for a year. Her reason was that she could not bear to return to the hospital (where she received her treatment) because... she paused and shook her head. When I asked her to tell me more, her eyes reddened. Through choked sobs, she recounted the day that her only son, who was 40 years old and

with Down syndrome, developed a fever and became very ill. She took him to the hospital, where he died very soon after. The diagnosis on his death certificate was COVID-19.

She spoke for a long time, and I pieced together that perhaps communication between the medical team and her had broken down, where she had felt bewildered and in the dark throughout her son’s hospitalisation.

“He called out ‘*Mak, mak*’ and asked for milk, but I was not allowed to give it to him. And then he passed away.”

She wiped her face that was wet with tears and said that she could “never forgive the hospital staff for their callousness”. That was why she could not return.

“Today is the anniversary of his death, doctor.”

I realised then that she had just wanted to tell someone about her child and her loss, on this significant day.

How grateful I felt, that I had held that space for her. ◆

Dr Tan graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1990. She is married with a daughter and runs her own general practice.

