



Dr Ang Swee Chai

# Medicine and Social Justice

By Jane RL

Dr Ang Swee Chai has given her presentation, "From Beirut to Jerusalem", all around the globe, including the UK House of Commons, Scottish Parliament, the US and Middle East. It finally made its way back home to Singapore for the first time. The hour-long speech was held in the Singapore General Hospital Postgraduate Medical Institute on 15 February 2012, 35 years after Dr Ang's late husband, Francis Khoo, was exiled from Singapore.

In the rarity of medical events, the venue was completely packed even before the talk started. Streams of people flowed in, filling up all the available seats, and some had to resort to sitting on the floor. The atmosphere in the room was casual, with many old friends in the audience catching up with each other before the programme began.

The event was chaired by A/Prof Paul Ananth Tambyah. Dr Goh Teck Chong opened the session with a short history of Dr Ang and her late husband, and the respect he had for the couple was evident in his speech. Dr Ang was born in Penang, Malaysia, but grew up educated in Singapore. She graduated as an orthopaedic surgeon from the University of Singapore in 1973. She is the first, and remains the only female orthopaedic consultant at St Bartholomew's Hospital and the Royal London Hospital.

Dr Goh's contagious sense of admiration for Dr Ang filled the room when he invited her to take the stage. The petite woman, who was barely tall enough to be seen from the podium, took the microphone.

Dr Ang, a staunch Christian, spoke of the beginnings of her long journey, which started with her disbelief of the Israeli army invasion of Lebanon in 1982. "Sometimes in your life, you make one trip, and that trip will change you

forever", she told the audience. "And this was one of the major trips I made." With faith, she resigned from her job, and went to Beirut as a disaster doctor. It was a trip that would forever change her perspective of humanity.

The cruelty of war was quickly presented to the audience through her strong voice, aided with visuals that would have been rejected by the local censorship authorities. We may be desensitised from the violence we see in modern media, but these images were unaltered, raw, and incomparable to the devastation we see on television. Images showing the destruction of hospitals, a United Nations compound, and an American school which was bombed four times, reminded us that war provides no safety for all. Dr Ang aptly noted, "Suffering and pain is universal. And it is across culture."

As despairing as the presentation was, there was nevertheless emphasis on the powerful message of human bravery. Dr Ang told the audience stories of people overcoming their differences and difficulties in the time of desperation. Different races – Bangladeshi and Swedish nurses, Arab and Lebanese doctors – risked their lives to come together to treat the wounded. Children in refugee camps lifted their hands up in victory signs, and said they were not afraid of death, although they were never found again. A Hamas leader guided her to a nearby church to pray. The Palestinians endeavoured endlessly to rebuild their lives, and did not falter even when their lives were destroyed the next day. "To be a Palestinian, you not only have to build, but you have to rebuild. So the Palestinians rebuild many, many times," a Palestinian woman told Dr Ang. And refugees offered her the little coffee and embroidery they had for her to remember them by.

Members of the audience peppered Dr Ang with questions



"Now I know there are Palestinian refugees," Dr Ang said in her closing statement, "Because on each of these dead bodies, there will be a refugee identity card, saying that they are Askar, Hafar, Gaza, from Nablus, and in their death, they have asserted their humanity. And it is a scandal of the 20th and 21st century, that a group of human beings declare their humanity through their death, and through their refugee identity."

Following Dr Ang's speech was a question and answer session, and members of the audience peppered her with questions enthusiastically. The event closed to a huge round of applause, and Dr Ang soon vanished under a sea of well-wishers. After most of the audience had left, the kind doctor took time to sit with a group of enthusiastic medical students, giving them an impromptu tutorial on the practicalities of disaster medicine, telling them, "If you want to do something, and it is the right thing, and it is not wrongdoing, go for it. No one can stop you from doing it." This echoed what she had said during her speech earlier that "there can be no peace without justice; justice is a prerequisite to peace".

While Dr Ang's speech was mainly about Medicine and social justice in the Middle East, I believe that her compassion is applicable to all doctors, no matter where they are practising. As the good doctor said, "A doctor will remain a technician, until you have a human heart. Then, that heart of compassion will make you a human being." **SMA**

## Dr Ang shares two photos of her experience in the field...

"The first picture was taken several days after the Sabra and Shatila massacre of 1982, when I returned to the Shatila refugee camp. The little girl was the sole survivor of a family murdered during that massacre.



Their house was reduced to rubble. It was October and winter was fast approaching. She was alone and homeless, sitting on the ruins of her home, with no roof over her head, and in a state of shock. I could not give her any hope, and felt despondent when I took this picture."



"The second picture was also taken in the Shatila refugee camp in 1987, during one of the ceasefires to allow the delivery of food and medicine. After the massacre and destruction of Shatila in 1982, the homes were rebuilt by the survivors, and there was a temporary breathing space when the kids grew up and babies were born despite the trauma. Unfortunately the camp was again attacked in 1985, and held under siege until 1989. Many were wounded and killed. I spent most of my time working between Shatila camp and Bourj el-Barajneh refugee camp, which was also under siege. Kids always followed me around. The little girl (centre) lost her leg to a large piece of shrapnel, but never made any heavy weather of her disability and was so grateful for the crutches we gave her." (In this photo, Dr Ang is standing first from the left.)