

# CHASING DRAGONS AND EXORCISING DEMONS:

Strange patient encounters of an army doctor

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A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean remembers fondly his days as an army doctor in a recruit camp in the 1970s. He led a carefree life, interrupted only by strange encounters with patients, two of which he vividly recalls.

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## CHASING DRAGONS

Heroin addiction was endemic in Singapore then. In every intake of about two thousand recruits, I tended to a few who were down with “shakes, shivers, sniffles and shits” for cold turkey treatment. Using antihistamines, kapectate, paracetamol and lots of blankets to ameliorate the withdrawal symptoms, I tided my patients through. I had not been taught how to treat drug addiction in medical school, but after a while, I felt I was coping well. My patients suffered less. Or so I thought.

Home then to me was a large room at the corner of the second floor where the sick bay was. One early morning, answering the call of nature, I went to the adjacent sick bay toilets instead of the officer’s toilet downstairs.

When I entered the toilet, I saw a faint glow of light from the gap under a closed cubicle and flickering rays dancing on the ceiling above. Sensing something amiss, I stealthily perched on a stool to peer into the cubicle. Through the opening, I saw a gyrating figure crouched on the floor over a minuscule flame. The recruit was inhaling the bittersweet wisp emanating from the molten heroin he was cooking. He was lost in time, gingerly swirling the molten mass in a cigarette foil to keep it from coalescing. I witnessed first-hand what addicts called “chasing the dragon”, in pursuit of the ultimate high. I dramatically kicked the cubicle door open and seized the evidence from the surprised recruit before he could flush it away. The military police was then summoned.

I was not so clinically adept after all! The sick bay returned to the “shakes, shivers, sniffles and shits”, which I had to cope with using my limited armamentarium. For the record, I was never assaulted by drug pushers in reprisal. I was never commended either. After all, it never happened. Narcotic abuse never existed in an army camp.

## EXORCISING DEMONS

What began as a ripple of piquant interest in the camp soon turned into disquiet. The camp commandant summoned me to his office.

A new recruit had gone into a trance during the morning parade. Dressed in his crisply starched Number 4 uniform, the young man pranced around the parade square in the animalistic movements resembling the “Monkey God”, evoking awe and bewilderment in the assembly. A quick-witted National Service officer herded the recruit to his bunk.

The Monkey God (*Sun Wukong*) from the 16th century novel *Journey to the West* is the mischievous monkey incarnate who protected the Tang dynasty Buddhist monk, Xuanzang, on his journey to India. As a kid, I had watched, elated, the scenes of *Sun Wukong* plucking hairs from his body and with magical puffs, transform them into his clones to win cosmic battles against demons.

Words then spread that the recruit was a potent medium (a “*tangki*” or spiritual intermediary) from a famous temple. To the camp commander’s dismay, some officers had even prayed to and sought 4D lottery “lucky numbers” from the recruit, believing that the audacious display attested to his supernatural power.

When I arrived at the commander’s office, he instructed that the next recruit who entered into a trance be confined to the medical centre instead. I had not encountered such patients in medical school but recalled how patients in status epilepticus were treated. Soon after, another apparently dissociated recruit was forcefully brought in by burly military policemen.

With the patient prancing around like a lion dance performer and literally wrecking my consultation room, I summoned reinforcement to restrain him. I expediently jabbed the patient with intramuscular paraldehyde and monitored his vital signs. I was neither superstitious nor demon-fearing. After the morning sick parade, I reviewed the patient with a phalanx of medics.

Then I did something out of the box. Speaking in *pasar* (market in Malay) Hokkien, I interrogated the recruit who was just out of sedation and demanded that he identify the deity that he was possessed with. I then ostentatiously addressed the deity by name, ordering it never to intrude the camp again because the “crown

hat”, gesturing to the embossed crest of the Singapore Armed Forces, was almighty in this territory. I also warned that if the deity were to possess the recruit again, they would “both” be thrown into the guard house.

I must have improvised from the famous scene in the 1973 American horror movie, *The Exorcist*, where two priests conducted an exorcism ceremony on Regan, a possessed 12-year-old girl. No new sighting of supernatural phenomena was reported in the camp after that. The impressed medics got it out that even “deities” obeyed the primacy of the crown.

Forty years on, I wonder if the second recruit was just masquerading for secondary gains and if the outcome of the ritual would have been different if I had “commanded” the first patient’s “deity” to stop its visitation instead. In the movie, *The Exorcist*, alluded to earlier, the cornered demon devilishly screamed and leaped from the possessed girl onto one of the priests. The possessed priest then rushed to the open window, threw himself out and died. Exorcising demons, I belatedly found out, is dangerous business. ♦

### PROFILE



### TEXT BY

### A/PROF CHEONG PAK YEAN

A/Prof Cheong loves being a teacher and seeing patients. When possessed with a compulsion to decant salient memories, he writes.