



The Sky is the LIMIT

Text and photos by Dr Tan Tze Lee, Deputy Editor

The town was dusty and the air hung heavy with the scent of fresh cement and diesel fumes. The bus interchange, the centre of public transportation in Choa Chu Kang, was operating at a furious pace. The MRT line also ended precipitously there, the extension still in the distant future. The train emptied at Choa Chu Kang, with commuters big and small, young and old, pressing for space on the myriad feeder buses serving the region.

We walked several times around the new town centre. It was empty – bereft of shops and facilities. A lone coffee shop stood empty and forlorn at the edge of the interchange. *Fabulous! We must bid for the shop space opposite!* Two months later, we were the proud owners of the 99-year lease space from the Housing Development Board. We could finally start on our journey as family doctors in a new town.

We now had a shop space, but how do we maximise the space? Ideas and suggestions streamed in from all corners. We took on board many of the suggestions,

distilled them and presented them to an architect friend. A design was proposed, the tender was awarded and eight weeks later, we had a complete clinic space outfitted with the then latest in clinic innovation.

An equal partnership

I couldn't have done all this on my own. My better half, L, hovered in the wings with a watchful eye, whispering pearls of wisdom during the discussions, dotting the i's and crossing the t's. We have an equal partnership in every way. We voice out our ideas, concerns and expectations (*Yes, we do that too!*) to each other and always try to come up with a final decision that takes all the ICEs into account.

We have faced many challenges over the years. Hand, foot and mouth disease, bird flu, SARS and H1N1 – all this happened on our watch. They gave us a real fear in our belly doing the work we had dedicated our lives to. For the longest time, doctors on our fair shores worked in

relative safety, but the last 20 years have been a roller coaster for the medical profession. For the first time in decades, going to work could mean getting an infectious disease, carrying the agent home, infecting all and sundry, with the very real risk of succumbing to the illness.

SARS was a game changer for many. At the time, L and I had the feeling that it was going to be really bad for us. Little did we know how accurate we were. Many of the cases originated from our wee town and many of the families who worked in the wholesale market in Pasir Panjang lived in Choa Chu Kang. There was a real and present danger going to work every day; the worry that we could bring the dreaded agent to our family was very real. Yet we couldn't just abandon our patients who had trusted us for so many years. L felt the same way and we decided together to continue the clinic's operation as usual. It wasn't easy; with us decked out in our personal protection equipment (PPE), breathing and working was a real effort. Our staff

also followed our examples – none took a leave of absence; everyone came diligently every day, put on their PPEs dutifully and served the patients as best as they could.

Growing together in close proximity

Whenever people find out that L and I work in the same practice, they are very often surprised that we are able to work so closely together in the same “office”. The usual comment is that if they and their spouses were working in the same office, they would fight every day! For us, it is quite the opposite. As we went through those difficult times together, we discovered deep strengths in each other. We are indeed more than the sum of our parts when we are together, and are truly thankful for the relationship and partnership that we have.

Showing respect for and taking time to listen to each other is so important. Many times, on the drive to and from work, L will share with me things that are on her mind, and

vice versa. I have come to deeply appreciate that time together, and the discussions we have had range from the mundane to the very profound. This has strengthened how we manage the practice and the family.

In every partnership, the partners have to be likeminded, with the same aims and goals. Although L and I have very different characters, we are almost always on the same page when it comes to the fundamentals. L always has her eye on the affordability of our clinic charges, and in this I always defer to her better judgement. We decide on the services we are going to provide and we interview for new staff together. We also decided on the hours we are going to work together, as we try to balance the needs of our young family and the needs of our professional service. Very early on, it was clear that we needed to spend more time at home with our young children. We jointly decided that L should spend more time with the kids and we set out to recruit doctors to help us with our growing practice. We made the

needs of the family and the practice paramount in our decision making, and always strove to find the middle ground that we can both accept.

If we have the right values and support each other in achieving what holds true, the sky is truly the limit! For we can achieve anything we set our hearts on. ♦

Dr Tan is a family physician in private practice in Choa Chu Kang. A GP at heart, he believes strongly in family medicine provided by family physicians embedded in the community.



Yesteryears

Our team

