

Retirement



HOW TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF IT

Text and photo by Dr Wong Kai Sang

When I considered my retirement as a dermatologist in January 2017, everyone, including my colleagues and patients, was telling me to not do so. As I was still healthy at the age of 68, they felt that I should carry on, at least part time, for another ten years or so. They said that I would be bored to death, and that I could even die earlier if I retired. Now, after two years, I would say that there could be nothing further from the truth. Retirement can be the most enjoyable, and should be the best time of your life. So let me share with you the lessons I've gleaned thus far.



Planning my finances

Having no money is no fun. In order to enjoy retirement to the fullest, we must have a healthy and recurring income. Only then can our lives be stress-free. Ideally, we should be able to travel in style at least twice a year, having worked pretty much non-stop as a medical practitioner for four or five decades. We should have no excuse of not saving enough, provided that we planned early and did not indulge in any vice.



Romancing with your spouse

As doctors, we were often dead tired at the end of the day and might have neglected the welfare of our spouses. Now in retirement, it is time to set the priority right. Our spouses have been supporting us and our families for almost fifty years, and he/she should deserve the biggest award. It is time to reignite the courtship, and treat him/her as if we are meeting for the very first time. I try to go for a movie or dinner with my wife at least twice a week, and we watch the sunset together over a glass of wine every evening, provided that the weather is fine. Just as the old saying goes: a happy wife is a happy life. This is probably applicable for husbands as well.



Do regular exercise

Being doctors, we should be well aware that daily exercises would be most important for us in our seventies. These days, I spend my mornings exercising; starting off with brisk walking two MRT stations at 7.30 am for about 45 minutes, followed by practising *Taichi* boxing for another 20 minutes before breakfast. There would be another 30 minutes of swimming in a lap pool before lunch.



Fraternising with the grandchildren

There is nothing more enjoyable than spending time with the grandkids. We are not talking about looking after them or educating them – that is the responsibility of the parents. Our job is to have fun with them and to spoil them. Honestly, at the age of seventy, we do not have the energy to run after a three- and a five-year-old for several hours every day; otherwise, we would soon die of physical exhaustion. However, there is always room for spending a few hours reading storybooks and playing with Lego and Playmobil sets. The sweetest thing in this world is to love children and be loved by them.



Be a good cook

We may not have had the opportunity to cook for the family before retirement, but now is the time to practise our culinary skills. It is very easy to download whatever recipes we need from the Internet. Do not get frustrated if things fail to turn out in the right way initially. Just remember: practice makes perfect. Always try something simple like grilling a beef or a salmon steak first. Once you have gained confidence, you can venture out to do something more impressive, like beef stroganoff and Chicken a la King.



Be an artist

We would never know how talented we are at painting until we are given the chance to do so. Start practising to draw landscapes with a carbon pencil. After a few weeks of it, progress on to put emulsion paints on wall tiles. Within months, we might be surprised to find ourselves almost like another Vincent van Gogh. We may even regret that we have started our life as a painter just a little bit too late. I was pressured by my spouse to take some lessons from an art academy, but I was afraid that any formal tuition might just disrupt my proudly original and unique style.



Be a gardener

There is always place for a few green plants in the living room. A few pots of pink hibiscus and desert rose would certainly make the house look pleasant and warm. We only need fingers, not necessary green fingers. Of course, after a while, we might find ourselves tackling plant diseases, be it fungal, bacterial or parasitic infections. It then brings us back to making diagnoses and prescribing the right treatment all over again. However, this time round, there is nobody to sue us if we happen to kill our "patient". Furthermore, there is no need to apply to the Singapore Medical Council for a licence or to pay for a medical protection fee.



Be a handy man

When we have any time left in the day, why don't we do something for home improvement? Get a bottle of wood oil and start applying onto the old furniture, or get a bottle of leather care to polish the old sofa. We could also find time to change the light bulbs or repaint the walls. We could find a few handbags that are worn out and need repair. Be creative and change the design. Our wives would be very surprised with what we can achieve with the rubbish in our storerooms.



Re-educate ourselves

Some of us may have been forced to take up medicine because it was the wish of our parents. Deep down in our hearts, perhaps we had dreamt of becoming philosophers, historians, architects or interior designers. Retirement can be the time to retreat into our study and re-educate ourselves in the disciplines that we sorely missed. Get a book and start reading about the Thirty Years War or the Meiji Restoration. Otherwise, indulge ourselves with the writings of Bertrand Russell and Rene Descartes. There is no limit to how far one can go.



Write an autobiography

We are not going to publish our biography unless our name is either Goh Chok Tong or Robert Kuok. However, it may still be worthwhile to write an autobiography just for the eyes of the children and grandchildren, so that they understand more about the history of the family. It might seem to be a difficult task, but once we start to put our pen to paper, all the events in the past seventy years will likely bounce right back into our minds.



Go overseas for a honeymoon

Honeymoons are not just for the newlyweds. While in retirement, we should go for honeymoon travels with our spouse at least twice a year, provided that there is enough in the bank accounts. My advice is to not join tour groups; there shouldn't be place for a tour guide. Just choose any of the beautiful cities in this world and get lost in it with your spouse for a week or two. Walk leisurely along the cobbled streets of Prague and Budapest, or visit a palace in St Petersburg. Dine in one of the Michelin-starred restaurants, have tea in a Vienna cafe, or enjoy an ice cream in Dresden. Soak in a private onsen with your spouse in Japan overlooking the Lake Akan in Hokkaido or the beautiful Matsushima bay.

Only when we have lived our lives to the fullest, would we find our lives really worth living for. ◆

Legend

1. Autumn leaves in Kakunodate, Japan



Dr Wong was born in Hong Kong in 1948 and retired in Singapore in 2017. He was trained as a dermatologist in Middle Road Hospital and started his own practice in 1988. Apart from being a frequent traveller, he was an avid collector of Chinese snuff bottles, Chinese and Western porcelain, Shoushan inkstones, Yixing tea pots and Meissen figurines. He has been happily married for 45 years and has four grandchildren.