

**What you see  
is what you get  
with Dr Ken Ung**

# **Straight-talking and undeluded**

**a**s the ex-head of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry division and the former clinical director of the Department of Psychological Medicine at NUH, one would expect Dr Ken Ung to list a whole string of successes achieved in those capacities. Instead when asked what he considers as his biggest achievement, one is met with the rather anti-climatic, jolt-back-to-reality reply of "helping individual patients get well".

## **Saying 'em as he sees 'em**

That's Dr Ken Ung for you – no fuss, no layers, no agenda, and certainly no off-the-record answers hidden behind politically-correct ones. Currently a consultant psychiatrist with Adam Road Hospital and MD Specialist Healthcare, Dr Ung's main motivation to move into private practice was to be free of organisational clutter.

"It is not just about financial freedom and autonomy. This allows me to practice as I see fit," he says explaining his move in 2004. He adds that the crossover also meant being away from administrative work, meetings, hierarchy, bureaucracy, and the like. "Of course, I miss the annual leave, study leave, conference leave, etc, but I'm definitely much happier. I have more time with the patients, and I get to do what I want to do, instead of what I don't want to but have to. I don't have to run meetings, organise journal clubs, or participate in research, which is all great for someone who has a propensity for such things," he says nonchalantly.

## **It's the small things that count**

Ultimately, to Dr Ung, making a difference in the patient's life is all that matters. This may not always be easy as he feels psychiatry is much art as is science. Despite being challenging





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and mysterious, he finds it stimulating. At the end of the day, the many appreciative patients can bear witness to his work.

He once received a letter from the son of a patient. The patient had passed away and the son had written in to thank Dr Ung. The letter went on to say, “Although he had an illness and didn’t like the suffering, or the problems, he always enjoyed seeing you because after seeing you he felt better, although you weren’t able to cure him. That kept him going.”

Obviously, patients like these make Dr Ung’s day. And although there are many such patients, each time he receives a message of gratitude, it never fails to surprise him, and makes him appreciate what he has.

He even asked a patient who is in her 50s, whom he had been helping for the last 3 to 4 decades if she had learnt anything through their on and off sessions. The patient replied, “Not really. But one thing I know, when I’m in need or desperate, and I come to see you, you will listen. And that helped just as much as learning some skill.” And this is true (causing a delay in this journalist’s schedule!), for patients who turn up without an appointment are never turned away, or asked to come back another day. But Dr Ung is quick to minimise his input and says, “She probably feels better after talking about it, and is able to come up with solutions of her own.”

Perhaps it is his knack in understanding that it is the small things that count. Like this other patient, a young very articulate lady, whom he had treated about 4 or 5 years ago. “She had fallen into depression and was struggling with her life. I gave her a book to read. Didn’t see her for years after that and forgot all about her. Years later, she turned up at the office and left an envelope as well as the book with my secretary,” recalls Dr Ung.

In the letter, she reminded Dr Ung about a meeting that he had setup with her parents. “I don’t know what you told them, but it made a huge difference. The fact that they changed had a big impact on me and I could get out of my depression,” she had written.

Dr Ung remembers that she had a

younger over-achieving sister. The parents by default had given the younger sibling more attention and time. The patient, being the more difficult one however, put them off a bit. "All I said to them was 'Look, you can't treat them equally because they're not. If anything, there's one who is suffering and needs more of your care, attention, warmth and understanding. The other one, you can leave her be and she'll still thrive.' Perhaps the parents took that on board and changed the way they interacted with her. Sometimes we do things that we don't think will make a big difference, and when it does, it gives you a nice feeling," says Dr Ung.

### Crossing the line

Then of course there are those who express their appreciation in a whole different way. Known as de Clerambault's syndrome or erotomania, the patients have an unshakeable belief that the object of their desire loves them. So how does Dr Ung deal with this unsolicited attention?

"I tell them, 'Look you're deluded, I'm married and have totally no interest in you romantically. You're my patient and we have a therapeutic relationship.' That's the only way to do it. You need to be open and transparent. You can give medications to try and clear up the delusions. But the boundaries are very important," he emphasises.

Dr Ung is very clear where to draw the line. "Doctors must be aware that there is actually quite a high rate of doctors falling for their patients and having affairs. We must make sure we don't become complacent and allow things to happen because once you get into it, it is difficult to come out," he cautions, as he had seen it happening one too many times, even among the more senior doctors, the ones more likely to be associated with writing text books on medical ethics.

One wonders if the noticeable absence of a sofa in his consultation room has anything to do with "maintaining boundaries". To which Dr Ung explains that while the sofa is popular with Hollywood, it is a more Freudian or dynamic psychotherapy concept, which is not highly subscribed to these days. It appears that briefer, time-limited counseling strategies are more applicable nowadays.

"Now we use mainly cognitive behavioural/interpersonal techniques, the premise being that if you think right, and act right, then you should feel right. So if there's something wrong, there's usually something

wrong with the way you are thinking or behaving," he explains.

### Fact or fiction?

That said, is there a tendency for him to analyse everyone and anyone? Dr Ung reassures this journalist that he does "switch off" when out of his consultation room. "Otherwise we would all have a nervous breakdown," he laughs. "It's also a myth that we can read minds," he continues.

This apparently comes into play in the medicolegal cases that he handles. The court has appointed him on numerous cases, which has ranged from the mundane shoplifting cases to the highly-publicised murder trials like the one concerning the two Indonesian maids who murdered their employer. "The court may have too high an expectation, and belief that just by talking to them, we can tell if the patient is making up a story. It's harder than that," laments Dr Ung.

Learning to take things being said at face value has helped Dr Ung deal with the situation, be it with a patient or with someone outside work. "At work if there are contradictions, then I would be upfront and say 'This doesn't add up'. Similarly, when talking to friends, or even strangers, I don't analyse everything someone says and go 'Hmm...why did he say that? Did he have a rotten childhood?'"

He also debunks the theory that psychiatrists themselves have psych issues. He believes that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. "People do go through bad times and everybody will need help at some point in their lives. I don't think we have more loonies or eccentrics compared with any other specialty. Although there are statistics showing that psychiatrists tend to have a high rate of suicide. But it does not apply to Singapore – I personally don't know anyone who has committed suicide," he says.

### It's a dog's life

He however does acknowledge that the child of today, in Singapore, is under a great deal of pressure, constantly trying to meet the high expectations and demands of his parents, the system, society, teachers – in a word, everyone. Two things prevent one from trying to defend the system: Dr Ung is the author of three widely-read child psychology books (*Preparing your child for primary one: A guide for discerning parents*, *Parenting young children* and *The early years*), and he

himself is a product of the local system who then went on to graduate from the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK.

He continues in what appears to be a topic of passion, "It becomes a very driven, performance-based, achievement-oriented society. If you're one of the high-flying, 'switched on' people, that's fine, you'd probably thrive in any setting. I fear and worry for those whose talents may lie elsewhere. They may take time to blossom, and may need a little bit more care and individual attention."

He believes the change has to start with the parents, but if the parents themselves buy into the system, then it becomes harder. "You can't run away from the system, but you can try to balance it out so as not to get too sucked in. If the child is not so academic, it doesn't matter. There are many other skills which are helpful in eventual success. Parents themselves should take the lead and show that they are not so 'kan cheong,'" he opines.

### Family first

As a parent of three children himself, Samuel (9), Oliver (3) and 6-month old Jemima, it is not difficult to imagine Dr Ung practising what he preaches. Breakfast at McDonald's, shuttling kids to classes, attending church, and reading together are what most weekends are made of. His wife, whom he met during his undergraduate years, is a dentist by training. Now a housewife, she has complete faith in Dr Ung and takes his job and the "fatal attractions" that come with it in stride.

Despite having a successful practice, and four books to his credit, Dr Ung is well-grounded. His family still comes first, be it in the thing that stresses him the most, or the way he spends his free time. For now, at least until Oliver is a little older, Samuel gets to enjoy some father-son bonding time which includes playing tennis together, and watching the WWE SmackDown SummerSlam Tour last month.

All in all, one has to agree that life has turned out pretty well for this self-professed cynic. **MG**