

## **'Thoughts of Life, Medicine, Wealth, Success & Happiness'**

My dear students

Decades ago, to be precise in 1973 on a day which I could not remember, I was like you. So, when your Dean invited me to speak to you, and after accepting the invitation, I went back in my memory lane and was trying to recollect, what my mind was like on that day. Of course, like most of you must be feeling now, that was a very unique day in my life. Like you I was excited and happy with myself of my achievement. I, like any young man of my vintage had many ambitions. To be a medical student in the oldest medical faculty in Sri Lanka, Faculty of Medicine, Colombo then, to be a surgeon and that was my ambition from my GCE OL times, to work in a hospital environment, which was very appealing to me as a child, and to be successful in life.

From that unique day in my life in 1973 up to this day was a long and tedious journey. Was it worth it? Of course, it was. Why do I say that? It is not because I became learned, wealthy enough to live a decent life and successful in the eyes of my parents but thinking back, it is that this journey has taught me the art of healing. How to help people; how to make them happy; how to get them out of near-death situations when operating in war fields or when attending to critically ill or injured at night; seeing their difficult journeys saddled with complications; being with them and attending to their needs; witnessing their sufferings in Intensive care unit settings; making decisions regarding their lives; giving them that strength to live; then in wards and finally, that day when they are going home with the happy family. I can again tell you; it is such a fascinating feeling. The feeling of self empowerment and innate happiness. No other profession in this world can enjoy this feeling. You will. Therefore, you have selected the best profession.

As an emeritus professor, I am still a university teacher. As a medical teacher I enjoy giving knowledge. I love to see my students using that knowledge in their day-to-day work, first to be successful at their exams; and then to heal sick. Just giving mere recall knowledge will not help them. As medical teachers we must be able to give you that knowledge in a user friendly and in an easily extractable packages so that students should be able to apply that knowledge

to given situations; be it a clinical situation to heal sick or in non-clinical settings, to apply the soft skills which they learn from us. I firmly believe that these two types of skills, the academic skills and soft skills must go hand in hand to produce a doctor who the society out there wanting to have. A doctor who is competent in knowledge and skills, compassionate in attitude and of course with the right mindset.

The technique of transmitting knowledge to a student in a format that a student can extract easily later, to be able to apply to a given situation; be it a clinical on non-clinical is a challenging task to a teacher. In medical education we often use patient-based teaching to achieve this task. Of course, this is the first day of your medical school career. It makes my task challenging because you have no medical knowledge. But that does not matter to me because in this commencement lecture, I am not going to teach you medicine or surgery.

I have heard many commencement lectures. But to be honest with you, I cannot remember any of them or what they were about. So, I thought to myself, shouldn't I give some thoughts to these intelligent young minds; a kind of take-home message which may be useful to mold their career.

I shall commence. This is what I am going to tell you. I am going to tell you a story. Well, it is a moving story, a story of a real patient. Main character of this story is also a surgeon. He was the patient. His name is Dr. Richard Teo. A Singaporean surgeon.

So, this is in fact, patient-based teaching.

Before his death on 18 th Oct 2012, he was requested to deliver a lecture to the passing out students at Dental Christian Fellowship Meeting. Title of his speech was **'Thoughts of Life, Wealth, Success & Happiness'**

I see a story within a story that will help you to become good doctors. Richard Teo has said that he too wishes to share these thoughts with all of us.

Before that I will just introduce him. He was a classic model for an aspiring medical student. Very active personality: a remarkable all-rounder, excellent both in sports and with studies, a man with great leadership skills and someone who was matured beyond his years. He was a millionaire; a cosmetic surgeon and he was 40 years when he died.

Now I will read this deeply inspiring speech by a doctor looking right to the face of death sharing his thought of life, wealth, success and happiness.

The message he gives is simple but powerful:

**Please remember. This is his speech. Not mine**

**I quote**

“Hi good morning to all of you. My voice is a bit hoarse, so please bear with me. I thought I will just introduce myself. My name is Richard, Teo. I am a medical doctor.

Since young I am a typical product of today’s society. A relatively successful product that society requires. I came from a below average family. **I was told by people around me that happiness is about success and that success is about being wealthy.** With this mind-set, I have always been extremely competitive since I was young.

Not only do I need to go to the top school, I need to have success in all fields. I needed to get trophies, I needed to have colours, awards, everything. So, I was highly competitive since young. I went on to the medical school and graduated as a doctor. Some of you may know that within the medical faculty, Ophthalmology is one of the highly sought-after specialties. So, I went after that as well. I was given a traineeship in Ophthalmology and I was also given a research scholarship by National University of Singapore to develop lasers to treat the eye.

So, in the process I got 2 patents: one for the medical devices, and another for the lasers. And you know what, all these academic achievements did not bring me any wealth. So, once I completed my bond with Ministry of Health, I decided that this is taking too long, the training in eye surgery is just taking too long. And there’s lots of money to be made out there in the private sector.

If you are aware, in the last few years, there is this rise in cosmetic surgery. Tons of money to be made there. So, I decided, well, it's the time to leave. So, I quit my training halfway and I went on to set up my aesthetic that is cosmetic surgery clinic in town together with a day surgery centre.

You know the irony is that people do not make heroes out of average doctors. They don't. They make heroes out of people who are rich and famous. People who are not happy to pay twenty Dollars to see a GP, the same person have no problem paying ten thousand dollars for a liposuction, fifteen thousand dollars for a breast augmentation and so on and so forth. So Why do you want to be a GP? Become a cosmetic surgeon. So instead of healing the sick and ill, I decided that I will become a glorified beautician. So, business was good, very good. It started off with a patient waiting list of one week, then became three weeks, then one month, then two months, then three months; all in the private sector. I was overwhelmed. There were just too many patients. I employed one doctor, the second doctor, the third doctor, the fourth doctor. And within the first year, we were already earning millions. Just the first year. But never is enough because I was so obsessed with it. I started to expand into Indonesia to get all the rich Indonesians who wouldn't blink an eye to have a procedure done. So, life was really good.

What do I do with the spare cash? How do I spend my weekends? With spare cash I got myself a track car. We have car club gatherings. We all go up to Sepang in Malaysia. We go for car racing. And it was my life. With other spare cash, what do I do? I get myself a Ferrari. At that time, the 458 isn't out, it's just a spider convertible, 430. There was this friend of mine, a schoolmate who is a trader, a rich banker. He got a red one and I got a silver one.

What do I do after getting a car? Its time to buy a house, or to build our own bungalows. So, we go around looking for a land to build our own bungalows.

How do I live my life? Well, we all think we have to mix around with the rich and famous like Miss Universe. So, we hang around with the beautiful, rich and famous. This is how we spend our lives; with dining and all the restaurants you know.

I reach a point in life that I got everything for my life. I was at the pinnacle of my career and all. I thought I was like, having everything under control and reaching the pinnacle.

Well, I was wrong. I didn't have everything under control. About last year March, I started to develop a backache in the middle of nowhere. I thought maybe it was all the heavy exercises I was doing. So, I went to Singapore General Hospital and saw my classmate and did an MRI, to make sure that it is not a slipped disc or anything.

And that evening he called me up and said that he found bone marrow replacement in my spine. I said, sorry what does that mean? I mean I know what it means, but I couldn't accept that. I was like "Are you serious?" I was still running around going to the gym you know.

But we had more scans the next day, a PET scan - Positron Emission Scan and they found that actually I have stage 4 terminal lung cancer. It has already spread to my brain, the spine, the liver and adrenals. And you know one moment I was there, totally thinking that I have everything under control, thinking that I have reached the pinnacle of my life. But the next moment, I have just lost it.

I was told that even with chemotherapy, I will have about 3-4 months at most. Did my life come crashing on, of course it did, who wouldn't? I went into depression, of course, severe depression.

See the irony is that all these things that I have, the success, the trophies, my cars, my house and all. I thought they brought me happiness. But I was feeling really down, having severe depression. Having all these thoughts of my possessions, they brought me no joy. The thought of... You know, I can hug my Ferrari to sleep, no... no, it is not going to happen. It brought not a single comfort during my last ten months. And I thought they were, but they were not true happiness.

What really brought me joy in the last ten months was interaction with people, my loved ones, friends and people who genuinely care about me. They laugh and cry with me, and they are able to identify the pain and suffering I was going through. That brought me joy and

happiness. None of the other things I have, all the possessions, and I thought those were supposed to bring me happiness. But it didn't, because if it did, I would have felt happy thinking about it, when I was feeling most down.

Those are what we call objects of envy. I have them, I show them off to others and I feel that by showing them, it can fill my own pride and ego. **But that didn't bring any joy to them either, but I thought they were a real joy.**

Well, let me just share another little story with you.

You know when I was about your age, I stayed in King Edward VII hall. I had this friend whom I thought was rather strange. Her name is Jennifer, we are still good friends. And as I walk along the path, she would, if she sees a snail, she will actually pick up the snail and put it along the grass patch. I was like, why do you need to do that? Why dirty your hands? It's just a snail. The truth is that she could feel for the snail. The thought of being crushed to death is real to her, but to me it is just a snail.

There I was being trained as a doctor, to be compassionate, to be able to empathise, but I couldn't. As a house officer in the Oncology department at NUH, every day or every other day I witnessed death in this cancer department. I saw how they suffered; I saw all the pain they went through; I saw all the morphine they have to press every few minutes just to relieve their pain; I saw them struggling with their oxygen breathing their last breath and all. But it was just a job. But was the patient real to me? They weren't real to me. It was just a job. I do it, I get out of the ward and I can't wait to get home to do my own stuff.

But if you ask me now, **would I have been a very different doctor if I were to re-live my life now**, I can tell you, yes, I will. Because I truly understand how the patients feel now. And sometimes, you have to learn it in the hard way.

Inevitably, all of you here will start to go into private practice. You will start to accumulate wealth. And actually, there is nothing wrong with being successful, with being rich or wealthy, absolutely nothing wrong. The only trouble is that a lot of us like my-self couldn't handle it.

Why do I say that? Because when I start to accumulate, the more I have, the more I want. The more I wanted, more obsessed I became. Like what I showed you earlier on, all I can was basically to get more possessions, to reach the pinnacle of what society did to us, of what society wants us to be. I became so obsessed that nothing else really mattered to me. Patients were just a source of income, and I tried to squeeze every single cent out of these patients.

A lot of times we forget, whom we are supposed to be serving. We become so lost that we serve nobody else but just ourselves. That was what happened to me.

My challenge to you is, not to lose that moral compass. I learnt it the hard way, I hope you don't ever have to do it.

We are being trained to be healthcare providers, professionals, and all and yet, we don't know how exactly they, the patients feel. I'm not asking you to get involved emotionally. I don't think that is professional, but do we actually make a real effort to understand their pain and all? Most of us won't, I can assure you. So don't lose it. My challenge to you is, to always be able to put yourself in your patient's shoes. Because the pain, the anxiety, the fear is very real to them, even though it's not real to you.

You guys have a bright future ahead of you with all the resources and energy. So do think about it, even as you go on to become professionals that, you can reach out to these people who are in need. Whatever you do can make a large difference to them. I am now at the receiving end, so I know how it feels to have someone who genuinely care for you, encourage and all. It makes a lot of difference to me.

When I faced death, when I had to, I stripped myself off all stuff totally and I focused only on what is essential. The irony is that a lot of times, only when we are learning how to die then we started thinking how we should live. I know it sounds very morbid for you to hear this morning but it's the truth, and this is what I'm going through.

Don't let society tell you how to live. Those things happened to me and I led this life thinking that these are going to bring me happiness. I hope that you will think about it and decide for yourself how you want to live your own life. Because true happiness doesn't come from serving yourself. I thought it was, but it didn't turn out that way “.

### **I unquote.**

That was his story.

As I told you I saw a story within this story.

And I sincerely hope that you too saw the story within this true story.

The essence of this story of Dr Richard Teo is that life is too short to neglect the real sources of happiness. But unfortunately, our ears are completely closed to this simple truth until we face the death ourselves.

Let's critically look at these terms, **Success Wealth** and **Happiness** that Dr Teo has mentioned.

### **What is wealth?**

Well, for many, to have wealth means having money and assets. This is also referred to as the material wealth. Although money is necessary for a comfortable living, many wrongly believe that money is all you need to ensure a fulfilling life. There are other more important things that provide happiness that don't necessarily have a monetary value.

The valuable personal assets you acquire, the knowledge, skills or talents, your relationship with family, friends and colleagues, your health, your selfless service to others to make them happy, your character and your values constitute the greatest wealth, sometimes referred to as “Real Wealth”.

### **What is happiness?**

Is there a link between wealth and happiness?

Well in my opinion, the Happiness you are looking for is inside you. **Happiness is an experience of joy; a contentment within us combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful and worthwhile.** Among the vital ingredients of happy life are our unique skills and abilities to enrich our lives and benefit lives of others, developing and maintaining quality social relationships, positive thinking, compassion and caring for others.

There is no direct link between wealth and happiness. There is only a perceived connection.

**So, what is success?**

**Success is not a destination but a journey of milestones and achievements.** The doing is more important than the outcomes. It is about what you learn along the way. One needs more than ambition and talents to make a success of anything. There must also be passion and conviction of whatever we do. Success and happiness are inextricably linked.

**Happiness can create success. But success is not the key to happiness.**

At this stage of your lives, you all have brilliant and unspoilt minds. You are entering this profession today and about to begin an incredible journey that will not only change your own life but the lives of thousands of others. You will use the rich array of activities and opportunities provided by the Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayawardenapura to learn, to grow and embrace a balance between academic and professional excellence and the pursuit of diverse cultural and social activities. We are certain that you will leave here, armed with knowledge, skills and a set of values as a good doctor, and with a level of professionalism and commitment to make a difference in your-self and to others.

**As a medical teacher and as a parent, my personal advice to you is, never compete with others. Never envy of their achievements or privileges. You must compete only with yourself. That is a simple receipt for your progress.**

I sincerely hope that one day, in the years to come, you will be able to return to this same hall and tell your students that you have lived as a medical professional with a clear conscience.

May I again sincerely thank your respected dean and all my colleagues in the faculty for giving me this opportunity.

I also sincerely wish that all of you will find happiness, understand the beauty of innate happiness and will have the strength and courage to reach pinnacle in your chosen fields of interest.

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