

In for the long haul

Occupational therapist Aaron Chong is always ready to embark on a rehabilitation journey with his patients

TEXT BY EMMY ABDUL ALIM

Occupational therapy was not a calling that Mr Aaron Chong had expected to embrace.

But the curiosity of the 28-year-old was piqued when he was a cancer research technologist at Singapore General Hospital and met some occupational therapists during an orientation programme.

He was so inspired by their work that he set out on a "quest" to learn about the profession. He did a job-shadowing stint with an occupational therapist for two weeks at Tan Tock Seng Hospital in 2017, and later took on a role as a rehabilitation care assistant at Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital (KWSH).

"These experiences helped confirm what I really wanted to do and led me to pursue my studies in Occupational Therapy at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT)," he recalls.

His "leap of faith" was rewarded when he received the Agency for Integrated Care's in-service Community Care Manpower Development Awards in 2018. The award sponsored his four-year degree programme at SIT.

A JOB WITH PURPOSE

The sponsorship was also what Mr Chong needed to give his family assurance on his choice of career.

"My family had some initial misconceptions about what the job is about, what prospects occupational therapists have and whether it would lead to a profession in the future," he says.

He did, however, note that occupational therapy is generally less understood compared with physiotherapy, which is related to body functions and can be applied to many different purposes.

"In occupational therapy, our goal is to help people perform all types of activities – not just work-related – that keep them occupied. We focus on making sure they are able to perform activities of daily living such as dressing, showering, toileting and feeding as well as leisure activities they enjoy.

"It's about enabling others to do the things that give them meaning in life – and that gives me a sense of purpose too."

He shares an example of an elderly patient with dementia whom he worked with for a month during his clinical placement in the hospital.

Because of his condition, the patient was not able to participate in the activities he used to enjoy, but through Mr Chong's therapy interventions, he was able to make a slow return to some of his daily activities such as reading the papers and doing jigsaw puzzles.

IN IT FOR THE LONG RUN

Working in the Community Care Sector gives Mr Chong more time to serve the post-hospitalisation rehabilitation needs of every patient.

He likens the process to a "marathon" during which patients normally need a longer duration of care – in contrast to a "sprint" in an acute hospital setting where patients are discharged after short-term treatment.

The time with his patients allows him to build rapport with them and personalise their therapy plans, including taking into account their home and work situations.

Recalling a patient who had to work from home after a fall, he says: "We had to simulate her workstation at home, shifting furniture around in our rehabilitation

gym so that she could practise strategies in managing her condition and continue working from home."

Since joining the Community Care Sector in May as a full-time occupational therapist with KWSH, he is even more aware of how transformative the profession is.

"My patients' performance, their participation in the therapy process and their satisfaction is what gives the job its rewards," he says.

But even as he keeps his patients' needs in mind, Mr Chong knows it is also crucial to prioritise his

self-care – something that he has learnt from a supervisor.

"To be wholly altruistic could spell burnout," he says.

"Based on my experience, my advice is to treat your patients as good friends so that you can strike a balance between idealism and pragmatism, and make it a point to care for yourself before caring for others."

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Working in the Community Care Sector enables occupational therapist Aaron Chong to forge a connection with his patients and walk with them on the road to recovery. PHOTO: FRENCHSICARILM



MR AARON CHONG recipient of the Community Care Manpower Development Awards

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