

Science and Miracle



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I have a long standing interest, and have dedicated years of my life, in the advancement of medical research. Dwell in the mind of many scientists is the notion that “humans can conquer all”. Whenever I am faced with an obstacle at work, I handle it in a scientific manner, with the belief that science is the solution to most medical issues. Miracle, in my opinion, is for those who have no confidence, and those who believe in luck.

When my child was diagnosed with acute leukemia in Oct. 2009, for the first time, I knew what it felt like to lose one’s mind. As a colleague informed me that “according to scientific research, the cure rate of leukemia is 50%”, I came to the cold realization that, a year from now, my child would have a 50% chance to either be alive or dead. Science cannot grant me half a child.

The primary symptoms of childhood leukemia are fatigue, appetite loss, weight loss, flu, fever, and other nonspecific symptoms that parents may easily overlooked. For my child, the symptom was left shoulder pain. The pain could have very well been the sport injuries from his tennis matches. It took five days

for me, a medical professional, to identify the abnormality and transferred him from orthopedics to pediatrics, where the pediatricians later diagnosed him with leukemia according to his blood test result. At that moment of revelation, I was as distraught just as any other parent would. I am faced with a dilemma: keeping the truth from him and he may lose his trust in me; or revealing the whole truth and watch him break. As the doctors prep for surgery and puncture sampling, I decided to face reality and inform my child of the horrible truth. I approached him while others were away, and told him, “Son, you have leukemia. We have to start treatment right away.”

“Why me? Why me?” Those were the words he said before bursting into tears. I sat down next to him, wiped his tears away, all the while hoping that my decision to tell the truth was the right one. Few minutes went by, agony and confusion subsided from his face. He asked me methodically about the treatment process of leukemia, and all I could do was to do a brief rundown of the treatment to come. “I agree to all the treatment you have mentioned, Dad,” he spoke with a sense of resolve in his voice. “The only guarantee I want from you is to keep my brain intact.” From that day onward, we faced the arduous and painful treatments, together.

The treatment of leukemia was filled with nothing but challenges and setbacks. My mood swung with the numbers on the blood tests. Science constantly whispered in my ear that, when these numbers are this and that, the probability of losing my child is raised or dropped to a certain percentage. It was then my wife began to approach religion for mental support. She has faith in miracle, or rather, has faith that a miracle would happen to our son. We both knew it would be a challenging year, and it was our faith that kept us going, encouraged us to continue the treatments when hope seemed to diminish. My wife grew stronger by the day, shedding her fear and doubt away as her faith strengthened. Every time the disease took a turn for the worse, and I was on the verge of losing faith, she was the one to comfort me. “Trust in science, trust in faith” and “we will pull through” were the pillars that carried her through the hard times, and the words she used to console me.



The family photo of Dr. Lam Chen-Fuh. Because of a illness, the family come to understand the concept of impermanence and the power of blessing.

After two rounds of chemotherapy, multiple bone marrow biopsies, and countless blood transfusions, our son finally received a bone marrow transplant with the assistance of Tzu Chi Stem Cell Center. Thankfully, he gradually recovered. Although leukemia left several surgical scars on his body, as well as an artificial joint due to avascular necrosis, it never deterred his will to pursue study. Around two years ago, my son returned to Australia to continue his high school education. Letting a child who only recently recovered from a major disease to travel overseas was a tough choice for my family and I. It was a decision we had to make, for we knew, he had to face his own tasks, too. He was accepted into The University of Western Australia with excellent grades this year, and we wish him, a recovered patient of a severe disease, to become an empathetic doctor.

During my research training abroad, my American mentor, Dr. Katusic, always reminded us with the following: “Do what you can, and leave the rest to God”. It sound very much like the words of Master Cheng Yen our medical

volunteers often used to comfort patients, “place our trust in doctors, and place our faith in Bodhisattvas”. Although the religions they spoke of are different, the logic is the same: faith only grows when our mind is at peace.

I have finally come to an understanding that, to become a wise and humble scientist, one cannot fully trust the notion that humans can conquer all. In the time of major changes, our only guide out of predicament is faith, whether it is faith in miracles or in science. I now believe that miracle and science can walk side by side.

August 2013, I made a major career decision: I left Tainan to work at Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital. Our entire family is grateful to Master Cheng Yen’s vision and compassion to found the Tzu Chi Stem Cell Center, for it was the Center that gave my son a fighting chance and allowed our family to stay a whole. Master De Huan from the Abode always reminded me that it was my son who introduced me into the family of Tzu Chi. I shall contribute my knowledge and profession with gratitude, and practice what Master Cheng Yen expects from us - dedicate all that I can to the people of Hualien, from medical practice to clinical service, then to medical research, and to education.



Forfeiting the firm notion that humans can conquer all, Dr. Lam now practices medicine with gratitude and sincerity.