

A Shoemaker's Love for His Wife

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“While healing patients or their families, aren't we also healing ourselves?” Sister Hsiu-Ying of Public Communications Office, Taichung Tzu Chi Hospital, reflected on the half-year nursing experience of an elderly couple, Aunt Su-Chin and Uncle A-Chung, as she documented the story. The heartfelt bond between the couple deeply touched the medical staff, who worked seamlessly to provide around-the-clock care and comfort.

A Loving Family

While seeking treatment for her chronic cough last May, Aunt Su-Chin was diagnosed with acute pleural effusion at the Taichung Tzu Chi Hospital. A fluid biopsy confirmed late-stage lung cancer. After being admitted to ICU, she fell into a coma. Only in her early 50s, the young grandmother could no longer care for the entire household and nurture her grandchildren

as she used to. Without her, the family was lost and their life in total disarray.

The story of this loving family brought back some familiar yet distanced memory. I saw my own mother in Aunt Su-Chin, who exemplified the virtues of traditional Chinese women, who would bear all sufferings without the slightest complaint so they wouldn't burden or inconvenience their children. As result, she missed the critical timeframe for treatment. She had a daughter my age, courteous and considerate, too afraid to trouble the staff to raise even a humble request to stay by her mother's side in ICU beyond visiting hours. This reminded me of my mother, who was also hospitalized in ICU a few years ago but passed away in just two weeks. Because of the shared memory and experience, I

felt a special connection to the family and just wanted to give them extra attention, perhaps as my way to make up for the lost time and regrets. My colleagues seemed to share the same sentiment and also wanted to offer extra help.

We all noticed how Uncle A-Chung, who loved his wife wholeheartedly, was not only present for every visit hour, but also stood at the first-floor parking lot, gazing longingly at the ICU on the third floor, sending his prayers. He even went to the social service office to sign up for organ donation, pleading with the Buddha to save the life of his beloved wife.

Meanwhile, our medical team was working vigorously to save the comatose patient. Perhaps it was hypothermia therapy taking effect or the family's prayers



Our most gratifying accomplishment comes from patient's improvement and being able to live without the assistance of machines.

answered, the very next day after Uncle A-Chung signed up for organ donation, Aunt Su-Chin was out of coma. The family reunited in the general ward, where the couple shared their happiest moments during hospitalization. Unfortunately, the blissful family time was short-lived. Aunt Su-Chin returned to ICU two days later due to troubled heart function.

A Farewell with Handmade Shoes

When her condition stabilized after respiratory failure, Aunt Su-Chin was released from the hospital to a nursing

facility. Within two months, she was readmitted to the ICU due to an acute infection. Her attending physician, Li-Hsiu Chen, was not optimistic about her prognosis and advised the family to prepare for the worst.

Uncle A-Chung came to us with an idea. More than five decades as a shoemaker, his wife was too frugal to ask for even a pair. He decided to make a new line of shoes and name it “Harp” after his wife (homophone of Su-Qing in Mandarin) as a farewell gift for her. We all thought it was a wonderful idea, full of sentimental value. Creating the new shoe line would not only be a source of encouragement to



Uncle A-Chung for the time being, but also bring him meaning and comfort if worst comes to worst.

Despite the care she received, Aunt Su-Chin's condition did not improve. The nursing staff sympathized with Uncle A-Chung's inner conflicts: his desire to stay and the reluctance to ask, so they kindly approached him and asked, "Would you like to stay a little longer to keep Auntie company so that she feels better?"

When Aunt Su-Chin's condition went critical, the nursing staff sensed Uncle A-Chung's sorrow and despair. Nurse Ling-Hsuan would volunteer to stay after work and listen to him reminiscing about life with his wife. "Did she get lung cancer because of the second-hand smoke she inhaled while I was working my shoe design?" Uncle A-Chung asked. Watching a man in tears, Ling-Hsuan tried to comfort him and ease his feeling of guilt by sharing her experience of caring for patients over the years.

Uncle A-Chung's children, occupied with work, could not visit regularly. As outsiders, we can only attempt to ease Uncle A-Chung's sorrow during the visiting hour, allow him to stay after visiting hour, and teach him how to massage Auntie Su-Chin. He gradually opened to us, sharing his mind, like "Our children have their own family and business, and now my wife is ill, I am the only one left, alone in the driver

seat...not to mention looking at the direction of the hospital late at night, the loneliness I felt." Uncle A-Chung, too embarrassed to be forthright with his children, confided in these nurses instead.

"Older generations are usually incompetent in expressing their feelings" was an observation we had made by recognizing the subtle, non-verbal cues among the patients and their families. I came to find out that the young nurses in our unit were able to identify their emotions and offer empathetic assistance. For Uncle A-Chung to have felt the effort was the greatest recognition for the staff.

Despite the pray and efforts, Aunt Su-Chin passed away. As the staff was dressing her, Uncle A-Chung muttered "I love you forever" to her repeatedly. Doctors and nurses were all in tears, grieving alongside with the family through the night. We visited Auntie Su-Chin's house the next day with our social workers and Tzu Chi volunteers to light the incense and express condolences to the family.

Although we often can't change a story's ending, we can leave our marks and make a difference along the way. Having been part of the experience with this loving couple, Uncle A-Chung and Auntie Su-Chin, we learned to bring ourselves closer to the patients and their families.