



# LAURA TAN

## SINGAPORE

**Ms. Laura Tan works at the VIVA-University Children's Cancer Centre at the National University Hospital as an Outreach Program Senior Nursing Lecturer where she focuses on expanding Nursing Training to Nurses in the Asia Pacific Region, thus helping the nurses to achieve their vision of how Paediatric Oncology Nursing can help transform the lives of children diagnosed with cancer.**

She also works with St. Jude's Children Research Hospital, the Kandang Kerbau Women's & Children's Hospital with VIVA to establish St. Jude Asia Pacific Nursing Institute, focusing on planning and training regional nurses to enhance and provide quality nursing care for all diagnosed with Childhood Cancer.

She also supports and guides regional nurses in providing Patient Family Education to ensure continuity of care whilst patients are nursed at home or in halfway houses.

**Always look for  
an opportunity  
to care because  
hard work  
polishes you  
into a gem.**

## On Relationships that Influenced My Career

Many people have influenced me in life. Several giants have and are still guiding me as I forge my way through life's streams. Two of the most influential persons that God has placed in my path are my bosses, past and current. My boss back in the 1990s was Prof. Quah Thuan Chong. He is a quiet man who guided us, nurses, by journeying with us as we work. He seldom has demands, only suggestions that we follow. One memorable experience was back in 1995, when he walked in with a concerned look on his face. Later, he shared with me that there was a rising trend in Central Venous Access Device (CVAD) infection rate in our paediatric cohort. This was proven in a research study that 11 per thousand CVAD were getting infected. This was very serious indeed because it meant that there was increased risk of death due to septic shock and additional exposure to antibiotic use, disrupting the treatment plans for many of our patients and the treatment cost was escalating for this group of patients. He allowed us to decide what to do next, and a very quick assessment of our workflow showed that the key factor was having busy house officers to connect CVADs to IV infusion bags, and to perform blood cultures and tests on patients. We needed to get our nurses trained and through the cooperation of every nurse on our team, we managed to reduce the infection rate from 11 per thousand catheter days to 2.4 per thousand catheter days, whilst Port-a-Cath went from 3.1 per every thousand catheter days to 0.8 per thousand catheter days. This was a triumph for every nurse on our team and we learnt a valuable lesson that if we work together and grow together, we can achieve remarkable things. It is actually more than teamwork; it is important to know that the entire team is like a family. This would include the housekeepers too.

My second boss, Prof Allen Yeoh, was the

catalyst for me to move from Paediatrics to Paediatric Oncology. Both my bosses have a strong belief that nurses are the key to perfecting the art of Paediatric Oncology care. To find nurses who devote their best efforts in caring for patients, we need nurses who are committed, skilled and loving. Prof. Allen is a doctor who takes people at their own value and will help them to be a part of the team. He sees and understands the complexity of a person. He accepts all that we can offer to make the team work better. He would offer guidance and is generous in understanding. Prof. Allen and Prof. Quah understand that each person has their own strengths and, with support and guidance, they can bring out the best in people.

Prof. Tan Poh Lin, another boss, helped me understand that transplant is not merely to achieve a cure through diligent nursing care but there is a need to understand the complexity of the transplant process. She taught me the vigilance of nurses is the reason we can control SOS, BOOP, GVHD and other infections. BMT process needs trained nurses with an eye to detail and the confidence to raise the warning alarm when a patient status changes throughout day or night.

## On Challenges and Overcoming Them

There are many challenges in the wake of Paediatric Oncology nursing. Here I will return to share troubles that we faced during the early years. A CVAD access training program was started when we discovered the rising trend of CVADs infections. We realized that there was a need to train our nurses how to access the CVADs and blood draws. In those days, nurses in Singapore were not allowed to needle a patient on their torso but only on their hands and arms. To start a the CVAD Training Course, I needed to get permission for nurses to access the port-a-Cath, in NUH. The resounding help and endorsement I got from the oncologist in our team encouraged me to push ahead and I spoke

with our Director of Nursing, Ms. Lee Yee Kew. She was supportive and kind. She was even willing to help us grow in Nursing Quality Improvement Projects that would later help us improve the nursing care and services. Thus, we were able to launch the Paediatric Oncology Training for CVAD Care. The nurses, after 3 months, took over the care of CVADs for our cohort of patients. At the same time, we realized there was a need to train moms and dads to flush CVADs at home, thus a course was made available to teach them.

Procedures were introduced for parents to dress catheter sites, to flush CVADs where they needed to learn how to handle the syringes, swab the closed port access site, perform the withdrawal technique, discard the syringes and use syringes to flush the device with normal saline and heparinized saline. Our patient's parents were incredibly supportive of carrying out these procedures at home.

There was one parent who had a child who needed hyperalimentation at home. I was asked to help with the care of CVAD access and deaccess for the child at home. I needed to train the parents so I brought along with me another paediatric oncology nurse, Ms Cing Khan Lian, to carry out the training and the father very soon took over the care of CVAD at home and this lasted for many years. As the child grew taller, the CVAD was revised and her father has since worked with us to transfer the care of CVAD to his daughter under his supervision.

A miracle happened for us when we asked St. Jude for help. Dr. Ayda Nambayan, a Filipina nurse who was working in St. Jude's Outreach Program, immediately took up the call for help. I was given the privilege to be in St. Jude for 3 months (Attachment Program). Whilst I was in St. Jude, I was taught how to write SOP, how to run a CVAD clinic, join meetings and weekly tutorials / lectures containing updates for all trained staff. I was also attached to the Nursing Education

Department where I gathered lots of tips from Mr. Sam, the then Director of Training. A year after my attachment, the faculty of University of Pennsylvania came on board to teach us, nurses both from NUH and KKH, the science and treatment of Paediatric Oncology. Immediately after this course, our nurses who attended the course graduated, we were graced by Dr Emily Ang, Deputy Director (NUH) and Current Dean of Alice Lee School Of Nursing, and Assistant directors Ms. Helena Mahesan (KKH) and Ms. Mabel Ong (NUH). It is very clear to our team that we are very blessed to have St. Jude Children's Research Hospital to guide us. We found an experienced sister who was willing to teach and guide us. St. Jude team have a big heart to share, that allows us to respond with a willingness to learn.

My bigger hurdle was to plan a training for nurses. The Paediatric Oncology Nursing Care was a course that embodied the Knowledge of Paediatric Oncology, Principles of Care and Caring Elements - active listening, reflective thinking and sharing, open-ended questioning. I needed to work on the course and look for lectures to train the nurses, having done that, I need to get accreditation for the course with the hard work of my mentors, namely Ms. Emily Ang. We were SNB Accredited in year 2009 and we managed to achieve ANCC accreditation in Year 2012.

With in our region, we trained nurses from Philippines, Davao, CMC, India, Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. Currently, I am training nurses from Rachel House, Indonesia. Rachel House is a palliative care service that helps patients in the later stage of their disease process. They also help to support patients and parents with limited resources.

We also collaborated with VIVA Foundation to start the VIVA ASIA Nursing Institute, where we trained nurses from Philippines both from Davao,

Southern Philippines General Hospital and Manila, Philippines General Hospital. We also started St. Jude's VIVA Asia Nursing Symposium in Year 2015, which runs yearly back-to-back with the VIVA FORUM and BMT Spring School. The St. Jude's VIVA ASIA Nursing Symposium not only updates our nurse's knowledge of Paediatric Oncology, but also it showcases the Nursing achievements of countries in our region. I happily would add that St Jude's support is always with us and all great doctors like Prof. Anjo Veerman and Prof. Rupert Handgretinger and our St. Jude Doctors – Dr. Carlos Rodriguez-Galindo, Dr. Justin Baker, Dr. Catherine Lam, Dr. Sally Blair, Dr. Courtney Sullivan and Liz Sniderman.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

I am very privileged to have a wonderful mom who always stepped in when I needed to be away from home and my child. It was still heartbreaking to leave my child to go to Australia to Study Research at Monash and to learn Quality Assurance Program at the Nepean University Hospital for 6 months and later to St Jude for 3 months. I missed my child terribly, but I knew she was well cared for. Till today, my child always state, "My grandmother brought me up." I am glad that my mom was alive and well in those days. I am ever grateful for her tender loving care for my daughter that she still holds dear to those memories. Her grandmother had stepped in to fill the gap I left. This is the meaning of extended family to give support and love when there is a gap. In later years, I am glad I was available to care for my aging mother, to clean and support her and to feed her. I am truly privileged to be able to have my mom during the days when my career was just beginning.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

Life presents a tapestry for all. We, as nurses, admire the tapestry and we identify with its rich

images and stories; at the same time, do not fail to fit your unique self into that tapestry of life to bring about life changing work for patients, parents, families, and fellow nurses. The tapestry will show us where we fit in and will merge to be a part of our lives.

Always look for an opportunity to care because hard work polishes you into a gem.