

## *Interview with Prof Tak Wah Mak*

# THE HEALING HANDS...



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In medical research Tak Wah Mak is a familiar name. After all, he is one of the world's leading cancer-research scientists, holding the distinction of being the first scientist to clone the genes of the human T-cell receptor in 1984. His achievements include making many pioneering contributions in the genetics of immunology.

But lesser known about Prof Mak is that if not for fate's hands at work, "Tak" as he is affectionately called by his friends, would today not be delivering his many lectures to his audiences around the world. Whichever route he chose, he would still be healing people, except that it is either to the spirit or the body.

"I wanted to be a priest. I actually enrolled in Hong Kong and spent my summers in a seminary for about three years. But my parents left to go to the US, and I kind of lost interest somewhere..." he said matter-of-factly.

Today, aged 62, his studies and his work are well documented.

He spends an average of 12 hours a day in his office in Toronto, Canada. When out of town, his work day which often begins with a breakfast meeting can sometimes run into the evening. He sits on various scientific advisory boards and holds positions in several research institutions and universities. Not surprising then that Prof Mak chalked up over 200,000 miles (or about 321,800 km) of flying in 2007!

*Continued overleaf.*



SPECIAL PULL-OUT

SALUBRIS

October / November 2008

*Prof Mak was at NCCS Humphrey Oei Institute of Cancer Research on 17th July 2008 to deliver the 4th Distinguished Lecture Series titled "Did the Oncogene Revolution Setback Clinical Oncology?"*

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Prof Tak Wah Mak

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Time is about the only obstacle that prevents Prof Mak from doing more work in research. He gets to play golf only six to seven times a year. He tried playing golf once in Singapore during a visit, but was stopped by the rain. He gets to read only three books in a year, as much of his time is spent poring over medical manuscripts and writing his scientific books, one of which – *The Immune Response* – was rated second best textbook by The Association of American Publishers for the year 2006. He said he took a leaf from novelist Robert Ludlum, whose signature book titles are kept to just three words, such as "*The Bourne Identity*" or "*The Materese Circle*".

Prof Mak is currently Director at the Campbell Family Institute for Breast Cancer Research, a post he has held since 2004. He is also a University Professor at the University of Toronto, and his works have been published in top international scientific journals. Some of his recent achievements include developing a series of genetically-altered mice for scientific study, which has led to critical breakthroughs in understanding cancer at the cellular level.

When asked what makes a good researcher, his face lit up as he proffered an advice which probably reflects the challenges he faced in the past before he established himself. On top of his list was "Passion". "It is very tough. Your papers get rejected. Your grants rejected. You get rejected all the time. You need to have passion, and you have to understand the system and not let the system destroy you," he explained.

"In research the challenge is not about discovering something you never knew previously. Rather it is about being the first to discover something in the world," said Prof Mak.

Next is "Curiosity". "You have to ask big questions," he added. At the onset, he said one must not be easily discouraged. A researcher should develop the mental strength and confidence to ask big questions. "And once you get there, you would have learnt to go there," he said.

Prof Mak said one of the dangers of working in big and very successful research laboratories is to develop a sense of complacency. To circumvent this, one should learn how to get to where you want to be on your own. Then you would get the satisfaction of knowing that you have added knowledge not only to yourself but to the world.

In his eyes, there is no such thing as "the best research centre in the world". On NCCS, he was confident that it would, like everyone else, be trying to give its best in its work on cancer research.

He described himself a "big fan" of NCCS Director, Prof Soo Khee Chee, and said: "He has passion. He has good scientific judgment and he has to overcome hurdles, like everybody else."

Prof Mak was at NCCS Humphrey Oei Institute of Cancer Research on 17th July 2008 to deliver the 4th Distinguished Lecture Series titled "*Did the Oncogene Revolution Setback Clinical Oncology?*"

During his lecture, he presented his case on the oncogene, peppering his academic medical discourse with several lighted hearted remarks, such as quoting a line "*Frankly speaking darling, I don't give a damn!*" from the novel "*Gone with the Wind*" and borrowing the title of a song from one of Elvis Presley's top hits, "*Surrender*".

*By Sunny Wee*