

## *Interview with Dr Richard Payne*

# GIVING DIGNITY TO LIFE'S END JOURNEY...

**T**rained as a neurologist and an oncologist, Dr Richard Payne has many patients experiencing severe pain and inflicted with life-threatening conditions, which moved him to take an interest in palliative medicine.

Early in his career, it dawned on him that his work can make a significant impact to improve the patient's quality of life.



A graduate of Yale University and Harvard University, Dr Payne completed his post-graduate fellowship in neuro-oncology and pain medicine at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC), New York. He went on to become a leading expert in pain relief, oncology and neurology, caring for the physical and psychological well-being of dying patients, and giving lectures on pain management and palliative medicine around the world.

He is currently Professor of Medicine and Divinity, and the Esther Colliflower Director of the Institute on Care at the End of Life in the Duke Divinity School, Duke University.

"When patients go for chemotherapy and radiation treatments for diseases like brain cancer, these do not always

result in a cure for the patients. In fact, often they die as a result of their conditions. I then became aware that I could still be a healer and a doctor at the same time so that even if I can't cure the patient, I can be a healer and offer him palliative care," said Dr Payne in an interview with *Salubris*.

While agreeing that there was some research work done to better understand how to treat pain, he felt that more should be done to look beyond morphine and develop new medication that has the ability to control severe pain.

"It is a paradox that even in the 21st century, the best medication is still very old medication. It will be very helpful to have something that can control pain without the side effects of morphine

such as constipation and nausea for example. We are not there yet and we need more research to find such drugs," explained Dr Payne, who delivered the 5th Humphrey Oei Distinguished Lecture on 14th October 2008.

The lecture, titled "Palliative Care as a Human Right", coincided with the official opening of the Lien Centre for Palliative Care by the Minister for Health Mr Khaw Boon Wan.

Dr Payne said Singapore is "on the right path" by setting up more hospices, offering palliative care at hospitals and training more doctors and nurses in this discipline. "Singapore is doing very well compared to the rest of the world in this field," he added. Although he has visited parts of Asia such as Hong Kong and China, it is his first visit here.

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*Continued from overleaf.*



Drawing from his experience, Dr Payne noted that there is a general inclination for older people to want to spend their last days in their own home. He also pointed out that there are cases where patients may be required to stay in the hospital against their own wishes. What is important is to make an assessment of the patient's needs.

"The vast majority of people prefer spending time at home with their family rather than in a hospital. So we need to put in place a system to accommodate their preferences," said Dr Payne.

Explaining how he chose the title for his lecture, Dr Payne said palliative care is a human right because it is about maintaining human dignity, respecting the needs of people and alleviating their pain and suffering. "It is also about

giving people the right to live their lives as fully as possible even if they have terminal illness," he said.

Having dealt with so many patients throughout his 22-year career span in palliative care, Dr Payne said it does impact his life. He now treasures the time he spends with his wife Terrie and his two children, a 26-year-old lawyer son, and a 23-year-old school teacher daughter. "I try to spend one annual holiday with my children," he added. This is more so after he was diagnosed with prostate cancer some five years ago, which he recovered from thanks to early detection.

Retirement is certainly still not on the horizon. This sturdy doctor with a six-foot frame professes to be a keen golfer, though he lamented that he has not been playing enough of the game to enable him to bring his handicap below 20.

When asked about political healing in domestic US politics, he replied eagerly, "Oh you want to talk about that, I can share my views with you." A Barack Obama fan, he feels that the African American presidential candidate "has the best chance of speaking to the nation in a new way".

He believes Obama's experience from living abroad and his background would give him the credibility to speak to the rest of the world. On the financial turbulence in Wall Street, he attributed it to "greed and a lack of morality". On religion, Dr Payne confesses that he believes there is "a God in the Christian tradition" and there will be an afterlife thereafter. He said religion gives patients a sense of hope and meaning to their existence.

*By Sunny Wee*