

## *The Betty Letters*

*My Dear Grandchild,*

*I was furious, this week. What happened was that there was an attempt to dupe me by a couple of so-called, Hongkong heart specialists whose only real interest was to squeeze about \$HK250,000 out of Bo-Bo, my froglike husband. Now, The Frog likes his Shanghainese food, as I have told you in the past, and I have warned him, numerous times, that it is not good for him to eat so much fat. Well, now, the message has been driven home, once and for all. At his annual medical check-up, it was noted that one of the arteries of his heart was being partially blocked by what a female diagnostician called, diffused fibro-calcification. These 3 big words mean, simply put, that The Frog is suffering from a deposit of calcium salts on the interior walls of one of the arteries of the heart. Naturally, being the frog that he is, Bo-Bo started to worry, after all, he is no spring chicken at 72 years. I took charge of The Frog and took him to see one of Hongkong's most-celebrated heart specialists. After a cursory examination by this doctor, an examination that lasted all of 5 minutes, this doctor suggested an invasive procedure, called, stenting. This is a procedure whereby a short narrow metal or plastic tube is inserted into the lumen (a tubular passage) of an anatomical vessel (as an artery or a bile duct), especially, in order to keep a formerly partially blocked passageway open. This procedure has been around for the past century, having been pioneered by the English dentist, Mr Charles Thomas Stent. I asked this heart specialist as to the prognosis and he said that less than one percent of the patients that undergo this procedure dies. He, then, suggested, by innuendo, that The Frog make a \$HK250,000 deposit in order to arrange for a convenient date for a 2-day stay at a hospital in order to undergo the procedure. I told the doctor that I would get back to him in due course and dragged The Frog out of the doctor's office before he could even reach for his cheque book. My idea was that I would seek a second opinion from another Hongkong heart specialist. At a visit to a second heart specialist, that took place about 10 days later, I was just as shocked as I was on visiting the first heart specialist. It was a very similar experience to that of the first heart specialist except that this doctor only asked for \$HK200,000 and not \$HK250,000. However, first, this doctor wanted The Frog to undergo a procedure called, nuclear medicine, to be conducted at a hospital in order to reconfirm the data from the imaging centre where the original find of the diffused fibro-calcification of the left anterior descending artery had been noted. After the nuclear medicine had been completed and analysed, the second heart specialist announced that The Frog's artery was blocked between 60 percent and 70 percent and that stenting should be carried out as quickly as possible in order to prevent ischemia – a deficiency of blood to part of the heart. The Frog was about to reach into his pocket for his cheque book when I stopped him, again, saying that I wanted to talk to my husband in detail before agreeing to the procedure. And off we went, with the heart specialist, looking a little upset that he did not get his money, immediately, as he had, obviously, planned. The Frog, by this time, was very upset because it had never occurred to him that he could have a heart problem.*

*Now, I had, when I was a little younger, been very friendly with the son of the former Director of The Department of Medical and Health, as it used to be called under the British. I was a nurse, at the time. Dr Peter Chan is the surviving son of the former Director and his specialty is in taking care of the elderly, such as The Frog. I took Bo Bo to see Peter and, to my delight, they hit it off, immediately. Before I knew it, The Frog agreed to see another heart specialist, a friend of Peter's. I went along with The Frog to see this third*

*doctor. At that meeting, which lasted longer than one hour, this heart specialist said that there was no reason for any invasive procedure because the diffused fibro-calcification was of negligible importance and, unless it extended to more than 70 percent of the opening in the artery, The Frog should be able to lead a fairly normal life, taking into consideration his advancing years. This doctor, however, insisted that The Frog go on a diet of high fibre, stay away from fatty foods, eat more fruit and vegetables than meat and eat less – not more than 2,000 calories per day. The Frog, on leaving this doctor's office mumbled some expletives to which I replied: 'You are going to take his advice and that is that!' The cost of the consultation was \$HK800, only, and this doctor said that he would send us the bill. The Frog wanted to go out the same evening of receiving the good news and I agreed. At a swank, fine-dining restaurant in Central, while I ate a 5-course meal with a bottle of Chateau Petrus, Vintage 1988, The Frog ate a plate of greens, finishing off with some fresh fruit ... and some tears to follow. I took no notice of him, but rewarded him for his good sense, later in the evening. You see, My Dear Grandchild, I felt that I had to reward myself for my good sense and sensibility.*

*Now, you may be pondering, at this point, as to the reason for this little narrative about The Frog, his heart, and the doctors. It is because, as I have just pointed out, 2 of the most-respected heart specialists in Hongkong care more about putting their hands in patients' pockets than they do about caring for the health and wellness of their patients. What happened to the notion of The Oath of Hippocrates? I cannot help but think that what these first 2 heart specialists did was contrary to their professional calling and, in the event that The Frog had been among the one percent of patients that dies from the invasive procedure of stenting, could it be construed as being a criminal offence, punishable by law? It seems to me that The Medical Council of Hongkong should be apprised of the actions of some of its members. The Code of Professional Conduct of Registered Medical Practitioners of Hongkong states, inter alia:*

- 'A PHYSICIAN SHALL always exercise his/her independent professional judgment and maintain the highest standards of professional conduct.
- 'A PHYSICIAN SHALL respect a competent patient's right to accept or refuse treatment.
- 'A PHYSICIAN SHALL not allow his/her judgment to be influenced by personal profit or unfair discrimination.
- 'A PHYSICIAN SHALL be dedicated to providing competent medical service in full professional and moral independence, with compassion and respect for human dignity.
- 'A PHYSICIAN SHALL deal honestly with patients and colleagues, and report to the appropriate authorities those physicians who practice unethically or incompetently or who engage in fraud or deception.
- 'A PHYSICIAN SHALL not receive any financial benefits or other incentives solely for referring patients or prescribing specific products...

'Medicine as a profession is distinguished from other professions by a special moral duty of care to save lives and to relieve suffering. Medical ethics emphasizes the priority of this moral ideal over and above considerations of personal interests and private gains. The earliest code of medical ethics was the Hippocratic Oath (4th Century B.C.). While the Medical Registration Ordinance (Cap. 161) confers upon the medical profession considerable freedom of self regulation, the profession is obliged to abide by a strict code of conduct which embodies high ethical values, protects patients' interests, and upholds professional integrity...

'Trust is essential to the practice of medicine. There can be no medicine in the absence of trust. The patient's trust imposes upon the doctor a corresponding duty to be trustworthy and accountable. Whereas a patient's trust is fundamental to the process of healing, the ability to heal depends importantly on one's professional knowledge and skills. It is therefore necessary for every doctor to attain continuous professional development through lifelong learning in order to fulfill the duty of care to patients ...

‘The practice of medicine often involves a close personal relationship between doctors and their patients, and patients sometimes become emotionally dependent. A doctor must be aware of such a possibility and that to take any advantage of such dependency may be abuse of responsibility and trust. Doctors should exercise special care and prudence in situations which could leave them open to such an allegation ...’.

*I do not know if I shall take this matter up with The Medical Council of Hongkong because I have been told that the doctors of Hongkong will just close ranks and that it would be a complete waste of my time. But I thought that by my writing this to you, you would be able to pass on my experiences to your friends just so that you know what some doctors are doing in these 416 square miles, with the colour of one's money, being more important than a person's health and wellness. When I asked one of the heart specialists what would happen if we, that is The Frog and I, did not have \$HK200,000-plus to spend on stenting, he just shrugged his shoulders as though to say: 'Then, don't come to me. Go somewhere else.' A nice touch, don't you think? Actually, come to think of it, I have never met an impoverished doctor in Hongkong or an undernourished Buddhist monk, anywhere. Have you?*

*Talk to you, next week.*

*Chief Lady.*

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