

LEAP OF FAITH

*An interview with
Mr David Dhevarajulu, Executive Director of CHI (2016 - 2021)*



BY TJUT ROSTINA, CHI

With the wrapping up of yet another eventful year, CHI prepares for a change in leadership as Mr David Dhevarajulu, CHI's first Executive Director (ED) since it launched in 2016, moves on to a new position as Consultant on 1 January 2022.

Often recognised as the face of CHI, David, together with Associate Prof Wong Hon Tym, CHI's Clinical Director, led CHI in establishing programmes and platforms that drive healthcare innovation, developing thought leadership, strategic partnerships, and bringing people together to transform the workforce, in anticipation of the silver tsunami.

In David's new role as consultant, he will continue to share his passion for transformation by remaining active in CHI's training and mentorship programmes.

He will also helm as programme director of the upcoming Executive Development Programme, a joint programme by CHI and the Nanyang Business School for healthcare leaders, to focus on driving systems change and collective leadership. He will also act as a speaker, panelist, or moderator for conferences and seminars run by CHI and provide consultancy advisory to various CHI programmes.

In a bittersweet interview sprinkled with the reflections and undeniable humour, David, who was also joined by his partner-in-crime, Associate Professor Wong Hon Tym, Clinical Director of CHI, shares what it was like trailblazing the path of healthcare innovation and transformation unlike any other.



CHI: As the very first ED of CHI, what went through your mind when the idea of a centre like CHI was first mooted?

David: I recall, chairman asking me to take on this role close to the ground breaking and the official announcement of the centre.

First, no time to think. I vaguely recall saying ok. Then having cold sweat.

The next few days, as the key thrust of the centre, “workforce transformation”, seeped under my skin, it deeply resonated with my inner core.

Healthcare was headed into uncharted territory, with an aging population on one hand and the need for skilled manpower on the other.

We had to change.

The more I thought what a centre like CHI can possibly do with likeminded individuals my cold sweat was replaced with goose bumps.

CHI: You’ve often referred to Prof Wong as your partner in crime. If your journey in CHI was a movie, which movie will it be, and which tag team duo would you both play? Why?

David: The Matrix...Neo and Morpheus...no prize to guessing who is who! (for our readers, David sees himself as Morpheus)

Come on, all the stuff we have done, it’s earth defying, mind boggling antics, right?!

Just like Matrix, CHI has a clear call to action and ideas rich in metaphors to ignite the imagination...or as Morpheus would say, “There’s a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.”

We were captive citizens of Zion, fighting for the freedom to be free of today’s shackles to co-learn to deliver better value and better health.

At this point, A/Prof Wong, candidly chimes in that he always thought of them as Thelma and Louise!

A/Prof Wong: We have both driven our cars. We have both been, at the same time, driven off many cliffs together as well.

Although, of course, you know how the ending of that movie went, but it’s also a parallel to what that symbolises, where the characters found their final freedom as well.

Just like the movie, we were both driving into the unknown and really taking a leap of faith, but I always felt secure because I was riding with David.

There were times when I wouldn’t be sure about things, but the moment David joined the meeting, he would do his signature “don’t worry, I’ll talk to him/her” in reference to any person who would be able to collaborate with us or whose help we might need.

CHI: What's your best memory at CHI?

David: My best memory would be our 1st conference, the National Seminar on Productivity in Healthcare (NSPH).

At the start of the conference, I quoted, Mark Twain (1835-1910):

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

And as Tym (A/Prof Wong) and I concluded the conference, many of the thousand plus delegates stayed on, contrary to convention.

I thought, "We must have done something right!"

We sang the song "Heal the World", we said our goodbyes and as I stepped off the stage, a lady approached me. She told me she was a nurse, and the conference inspired her to explore, to dream and to discover a better brighter tomorrow for healthcare.

That one remark made the effort worthwhile. Now as I look back...it was indeed a journey of insight, a journey of discovery, of learning from the best, but most of all a journey of hope for healthcare.

A/Prof Wong: It was one of my thrilling moments too! And we were side by side for that!

And I reckon the completion of the inaugural CHI Fellowship programme was an unforgettable moment as well!

We were going through the final presentations of the CHI Fellows, and David, myself, as well as Jonathon Gray from UK were quizzing them, and I was looking at David's face and he was beaming throughout. He's been the best coach all along.

This is a prime example of coaching and I know that the 16-weeks of the CHI Fellowship programme have brought wonderful memories for him. I don't see this as his swan song. I see this as his last song before the interval. So there is going to be a second act coming up!



With the inaugural intake of the CHI Fellowship programme in Leadership and Innovation, a SG-UK collaboration with CHI partners.



David introducing CHI to Singapore's Health Minister, Mr Gan Kim Yong at the official opening of the Ng Teng Fong Centre for Healthcare Innovation building in 2019.

CHI: As ED of CHI, what was the biggest challenge you faced and how did you overcome it?

David: The biggest challenge has always been and I think will always be the positioning of CHI within the innovation eco-system.

Remaining agnostic even as we continue to connect with the innovation community to co-learn and co-create to add value can be tough.

While there may be huge cultural divides between providers and community partners at the intent level, ie: adding healthy life to our people has provided that space of influence for CHI to do its magic.

A/Prof Wong: And really now as I look back, right, I can see how David did his magic.

And that magic was all in building relationships and in really seeking to understand what is it that people wanted.

It's really about creating meaningful space for people to explore.

And you (David) have got a huge bank of great relationships that you could leverage and fall back on. That made a lot of things easier in many events.

I think we made a lot of cold calls to people seeking help. A lot of it was because you had a lot of currency with many of the people in tantalising and then it just reads much easier.

David: I thought we have an excellent partnership. I mean, like, we won't share on camera that we did, but it was all really worthwhile. (David chuckles)



CHI: What do you look forward to most in your new role as consultant?

David: We visited Canterbury Health Board's Design Lab on 21st Sep 2016, as part of our co-learning in healthcare design.

Christchurch had been ravaged by earthquakes. At the time of the visit, we witnessed a slow but gradual revitalisation of the city centre, the epicentre of the quake.

I marvelled at the resolve of the people. What was their motivation to continue to rebuild after each successive earthquake?

As a student of culture I often use the lens offered by Hofstede to understand the 'why' behind the 'what', and it was eloquently answered by a sign at the design facility.

It read, "He Tangata, He Tangata, He Tangata" in Māori, in relation to a question, "What's the most important thing?"

Translated, it means, "It's the people, it's the people, it's the people"

And that's what I resolve to do as a CHI consultant.

To not only help in the growth of healthcare leaders, but also to nurture them to be men and women of stature, honour and repute.

Finally, I have received much in my 25 years in healthcare. The giants in Tan Tock Seng Hospital who carried and nurtured me. And partners from Sweden, the United Kingdom and Thailand who continue to inspire me.

Indeed, God willing, it will be a privilege for me to continue to contribute in innovating care for the people of Singapore.



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