

Sanne Fong on how occupational therapy transforms lives in Hong Kong

TRANSCRIPT

Sanne Fong, occupational therapist, educator and advocate

Andy McLean 00:00

Andy. Hello and welcome back to Moments in Mind from Pearson Clinical Assessment!

Thanks for tuning into this, the final episode in season three of Moments in Mind. I'm Andy McLean, and in this podcast, we meet clinicians, educators and therapists who are changing lives for the better. We talk about landmark moments in their career - the tough moments as well as the breakthroughs - to find out what they've learned about others and what they've learned about themselves.

And so to today's guest, I'm thrilled to say that our guest today is Sanne Fong, who is the Associate Program Leader of the Master of Occupational Therapy Program at the Education University of Hong Kong. In her varied career, she's worked with children and families at Hong Kong Children's Hospital, and she's currently the chair of the Hong Kong Occupational Therapy Association.

So we've got a really wide-ranging conversation about to kick off! Sanne, welcome to the show!

Sanne Fong

Hi Andy. It's great to be here.

Andy McLean

Let's jump in with our first question, which is the same for every episode - I love always hearing the answers to this one! Can you tell me about your earliest childhood memory?

Sanne Fong 01:22

I remember my elder brother brought me and my dog to the playground near home. Well, actually, my mother would not allow me to go by myself. It was dangerous for a girl. Then my brother could play football with his peers, and I enjoyed my 'me time' with my dog, and all the exciting facilities like three-metre-high slide, climbing the scaffold, self-paced merry-go-round, something like that. And I still remember how my dog shared an ice cream cone with me.

Andy McLean 01:59

Oh, wow. So quite literally, a 'sweet' memory! Lovely. And it's very interesting to hear you reflect on those early memories, because, in a way, you were kind of searching for stimulation from a very young age. So it's no wonder to hear that you were drawn to OT as a career!

Now, I should ask you a quick question before we go any further, because there are some misunderstandings in the community about what 'occupational therapy' actually is. Some people assume that it's just about 'helping people to do their jobs', but it's more about helping people to do whatever they need to do in their lives. So for the uninitiated, can you perhaps share with me a definition of occupational therapy?

Sanne Fong 02:37

Well, I like the new definition of occupational therapy approved by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists in 2005. It said that occupational therapy promotes health and wellbeing by supporting participation in meaningful occupations that people want need or are expected to do.

And in addition - for me - there is another slogan: 'Where there is the will, there is a way'. So no matter how disabled we are, we can still live the way we want.

Andy McLean 03:13

I love that Sanne, because what that gives people is hope, and it gives people a sense of potential, doesn't it? And that's what your work is all about.

Sanne Fong 03:20

This is for myself and my patients.

Andy McLean 03:24

Yeah, it works both ways, doesn't it. That's right.

Let's think back to your early career now. I'm interested if you could maybe describe for me a moment of occupational therapy breakthrough that you witnessed very early on in your career?

Sanne Fong 03:37

In my early time as an OT I did all the OT process - helping a lot of children and teens, accommodating [them] into school system. This is such a sense of satisfaction that I know they can live independently in the community.

I have a teenage patient with cerebral palsy. And even worse, comorbid with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. So the difficulties in mobility and dexterity with additional joint pain limited his performance in daily activities.

We supported him in the school and open examination accommodation. He completed his Master's degree. Well, he has completed two Master's degrees, actually! And even became an editor of a newspaper.

So I'm actually so proud of him. And he is now my friend after 30-something years!

Andy McLean 04:49

Oh, how incredible.

Now, as well as working with cerebral palsy, I know you've worked with people who have had traumatic injuries, not just as a therapist and a clinician, but also as an advocate too. And you've made friends through that work too. My understanding, Sanne is that you've been very involved in Barrier Free Access in Hong Kong. Can you tell me about somebody who you've worked alongside in that advocacy work, who perhaps has some physical challenges and how they've overcome those?

Sanne Fong 05:19

Oh yes, I can share some experience in this. I have a friend with severe physical disabilities, and we know each other because we are doing some advocacy work of Barrier Free Access in Hong Kong. And we requested the advancement in facilities in the Legislative Council, and that really makes some changes in the policy.

This friend, why he got the severe physical disabilities, was because he fell from a horse and became quadriplegic. He moves around in his wheelchair most of the time. He just depends on his power wheelchair. He can manipulate the wheelchair with the chin and his head only. So you can imagine, how disabled he is. He told me, 40 years ago, he took almost a year to complete a book.

Andy McLean 06:29

So it took him one year to read a book, Sanne. Why was that?

Sanne Fong 06:35

Because after he fell from the horse, he broke his neck, so he becomes a quadriplegic. During the acute phase, he must lie on the bed for complete bed rest in order to allow enough time for the recovery of the bone and the spine.

And the only leisure that he has was reading the book. So but he's just lying on the bed supine. So someone has done something to hold a book for him, but what he [has to] do is to wait for someone coming to his bed to have some caring procedure, and then he can ask that person to turn a page for him, and that's why it took him almost one year to complete that book.

Andy McLean

How incredible.

Sanne Fong

Until his occupational therapist - knowing that this is his only leisure in the bed - she tried her best to secure funds to purchase a page-turning machine for him.

You know - 40 years ago, from overseas - that [requires] a huge lump sum!

So I mean this friend, he knows what exactly an OT can help in daily function, leisure and quality of life for them.

Andy McLean 08:09

Now Sanne, I believe that when you worked at a children's hospital, there was some therapeutic work that you did involving horticultural therapy, which I'm fascinated by. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Sanne Fong 08:21

Well, actually, I was involved in the commissioning work for the rehabilitation service in this hospital. We have a greenhouse designed for patients very early in the commissioning phase of the hospital. We established the horticultural activities for both individual and groups.

So children can learn the 'cycle of life', and even for those suffering life-threatening diseases, they can own their plant, and they can start from germination.

And I can share a case: I had a kid. She passed away almost just one year after her cancer. Initially, she refused to leave her bed or her ward, but because of this [horticultural] activity, because the seed she germinated in the ward, and we moved that to the greenhouse, and we took care of the plant.

And she could, I mean, she would ask her father [to take] her to the to the greenhouse, to visit her plant. She could still enjoy some time with her father.

And there was a thing that she would like to see every day. That is very important for kids suffering cancer and having a lot of painful procedures. But there is something that she wants, she likes.

And during her funeral, I brought her plant to her parents, and they feel so thankful about we keeping the plant for her.

Andy McLean 10:12

Oh, that's beautiful. What a beautiful thing to do, Sanne.

Well, let's take a very quick break, and afterwards we'll discuss your work in education, and we'll also talk more about your high points and challenges during your career.

So we'll be right back after this break.

Ad break 10:35-11:01

Andy McLean 11:01

Welcome back to the show!

Now, Sanne, I believe that you very recently bumped into an old patient who you treated when he was four years old. He's now 43! Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Sanne Fong 11:17

That was really an amazing experience. This is a boy with this cerebral palsy. I knew him when I was still a student and I was taking the placement in a special childcare centre. I met him again in a patient's self-help group, and he is now taking a PhD course related to teaching AI in rehabilitation.

Andy McLean 11:47

How wonderful, Sanne.

Can you also tell me a bit about how you use standardised assessments and how they contribute to your work as an OT and the outcomes that you achieve for patients?

Sanne Fong 11:59

Standardised assessment are very important. Well, they can help us in clear documentation of a patient's performance with their existing conditions and throughout the process. And during the progress of their treatment, that will guide us in giving us key performance indicators. And we may also publish some papers about the effectiveness of certain program.

Andy McLean 12:36

I see. So it kind of allows you to chart your course through the patient's journey, and indeed, not just yourself too, right? Because presumably that can be a single source of truth for all the various health professionals to work from?

Sanne Fong 12:49

So that's why another point is that will ensure that we have a common language to know about each other the progress of the patient?

Andy McLean 13:03

Yes, of course. So Sanne, you're currently at the Education University of Hong Kong, and before that, you actually had 10 years' experience in education too. Tell me about what drew you to that and why you find that so rewarding?

Sanne Fong 13:17

Before I came to the university, I had almost 10 years' experience in being a clinical placement educator. So that is another interest [of mine] to nurture the generation of OTs.

And I think my way to treat the patients is really impressive - I know it - and I hope I can help them to develop this attitude. I know they can learn all the things from the book, from the teacher, but the way to communicate with the patient, the way to help them leading their life is another story.

So I would like to help my students, in the very beginning in the university, to start this work. I think that would be easier for another clinical educator in the hospitals or in the community.

And also this is a new program in the education University of Hong Kong. And so I take this challenge to start the Master of OT program here. And in addition to the education background of this university, we may have more chance to reach out to the children or adolescents with special education needs. And I hope we can also open this market for the community and the private sectors and dealing with those children in need in mainstream schools.

Andy McLean 15:08

How terrific. So not only are you making an impact as an individual clinician Sanne, but what you're talking about here is kind of amplifying your impact, right?

Sanne Fong 15:18

Well, it's really fantastic. You know, after more than 10 years clinical training experience, some of my previous students, they are all they are leading their clinics or being in charge in their rehabilitation centre. They come back and tell me about their satisfaction and relate to the comments that I, or not comment, the feedback that I gave them to help them throughout the career path.

I myself may influence how they treat people with their disabilities, and now I am inviting them to be my clinical educators for my students! So this is really something that I didn't expect 10 years ago.

Andy McLean 16:24

Yeah, it feels like it's your destiny, doesn't it? This is a virtuous circle that you're describing here, which is quite a beautiful thing.

So Sanne, we touched earlier on the fact that you've done some advocacy work for positive change in Hong Kong. How would you describe Hong Kong today versus a few decades ago when your career began?

Sanne Fong 16:46

Oh yeah. So next time when you come to Hong Kong, leaving the airport, you will find that if you are carrying the luggage, you won't have to wave a taxi - you just go straight [there] - there is no barrier, and through the glass door you can, you can wave the taxi. And that is one point.

Another point is about the universal design of the toilet in every story in the in the mall or any public area. If there is male and female toilet, they should have unisex toilets. For instance, if a female child come with her father, so they need a unisex toilet or a family toilet for that, and that is some change, according to our advocacy.

Andy McLean 17:49

Well, congratulations. It must be a wonderful thing to see the results of your advocacy work on the street, and you know the physical manifestation of that, and I believe you're doing further work on the Barrier Free Policy too, aren't you?

Sanne Fong 18:04

Actually we will have another round of amendment of the Barrier Free Policy. So we're working together again, and I hope that we can lead the life in Hong Kong even better for any age or any conditions.

Andy McLean 18:29

How terrific, Sanne. There have been so many memorable moments from your career, I'm sure, down the years, but when you look back in years to come, can you perhaps give us a parting memory of one particular case that will really stay with you?

Sanne Fong 18:46

Maybe I can tell you about a burns case, a case after burn injury, maybe 20 years ago. I think that's very serious burn that there are deformities at the neck.

So because of the contracture of the scar is pulling the face down, and he cannot close his eyes properly when he fall asleep and the wound on the trunk on and off because of the tightness of the scar.

Just rehabilitation is not enough. So we have discussion in the clinic with the surgeon, and they do the surgery for him within a month and release his contracture, and it will gradually improve, and that makes a lot difference for his life.

So we have a lot of treatment for him, like pressure therapy, some you know, mobilisation, exercise, hand function, training, all sorts of things. And we also have a joint clinic.

So we will include the patient, the surgeon and occupational therapist. We will see the patients together, because that is a patient-centered concept. So we must involve the patient and the family.

This patient was at the adolescent phase, so he won't follow your commands anything! But because we think that he would like to have more friendships with some other people, we put him in a group and [that helps] make him become more independent in all sorts of things. And he really cooperates with us, better than his family members!

So he started his life, and two years later, he was actually discharged from our service. But he come back with an invitation for about his marriage! So we go and celebrate that with him!

Andy McLean 21:26

How wonderful. And so you were there on his wedding day!

Sanne Fong 21:30

And that is a very, very impressive condition - that someone [who] already leaving you and [they] come back and give us that invitation and tell us about his improvement. And I remember later he started his own business [he was not a worker/employee]. So that is a really, really amazing guy.

Andy McLean 22:01

I think that moment of celebration, Sanne will be a lovely point on which for us to conclude the conversation. So it just remains for me to say thank you so very much for the work that you do and for today's discussion. I've really enjoyed it.

Sanne Fong 22:13

Thank you so much.

Andy McLean 22:22

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of Moments in Mind, a podcast by Pearson Clinical Assessment.

If you'd like to know more about the standardised assessments used by occupational therapists, you can find all the details at the Pearson Clinical website.

And we have lots more episodes of Moments in Mind in your podcast feed already. So if you've missed any of our previous episodes in seasons one, two or three, just check out Spotify, Apple Podcasts, YouTube or indeed, wherever you get your podcasts. And while you're there, do feel free to leave us a rating or review. We'd be very grateful if you did.

And because this is the final episode in our third season, I just want to take this opportunity to thank once again, all of the wonderful guests who we've had on Moments in Mind in season three. It has been a genuine privilege to meet and chat with everyone who's appeared on the show.

And so until next time, this is me, Andy McLean, saying thanks for joining us and goodbye for now.