



Bringing light to the dark: an interview with Dr Cecilia Fan and her medical team

The Medical Support Team conducting daily health assessments during their humanitarian mission in Türkiye

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When disaster strikes, the resilience of a community is often measured by the dedication of those who step forward to help. Among them are healthcare professionals who extend their expertise beyond the confines of hospitals and clinics, venturing into the most challenging environments to provide humanitarian aid. One such individual is Dr Cecilia Fan, a consultant in family medicine with over 30 years of experience working in the Department of Health. She then served in the Professional Development and Quality Assurance Service, overseeing families clinic services for government employees and correctional medical services, and operating quarantine centre medical posts during major infectious disease outbreaks such as SARS, swine flu, and coronavirus disease 2019. Dr Fan's unwavering dedication to humanitarian efforts culminated in her leading the Department of Health medical support team of the Hong Kong SAR Search and Rescue Team to Türkiye in response to the 2023 Türkiye–Syria earthquake.

The Department of Health medical support team, comprising two doctors and two nursing officers, was deployed with the core mission of supporting the health of frontline rescue workers. Although many might assume such missions focus on direct victim care, it is equally essential to ensure that firefighters and rescue personnel remain physically and mentally fit during their lifesaving operations. Healthcare professionals in these settings act as the backbone of operations, ensuring that those risking their lives to save others are well cared for.

Their journey began with an arduous deployment process, as flights could only be confirmed at the last minute, requiring multiple transfers before arriving in Hatay. Once on the ground, the team travelled through damaged and unlit roads, navigating a disaster-ravaged landscape with limited supplies. Dr Kinson Lau, the other doctor on the team, recalls, “It was pitch black, the roads had no lights, and the driver had been driving through the small hours without rest. Our commander kept talking to him to keep him awake.” Upon arrival, the team set up a tent as a medical post on open ground riddled with cracks, to serve the rescue forces. They conducted daily health checks, monitoring vital signs and psychological well-being. The nonstop travel and race-against-time operation schedule led to fatigue among team members, whereas the wide temperature range and cold nights caused respiratory symptoms. Minor injuries and skin conditions were common, and the psychological stress of witnessing destruction and death was immense. When one team member fell ill with a high fever, the team had to assess the need to isolate him to prevent the spread of infection. It was decided that it would be more suitable to treat him while ensuring his tent-mate wore a mask. Mr CF Kwok, nursing officer of the team, stated, “He might feel deserted if being isolated. Instead, we ensured his tent-mate, who is caring and supportive, wore a mask and took precautions.”

Another major challenge was maintaining mental well-being. The emotional weight of



(From left) Mr Stephen Ngai, Mr CF Kwok, Dr Kinson Lau, and Dr Cecilia Fan with student reporters, Valerie and Eric



The Medical Support Team upon arrival at Adana Airport, Türkiye



The first smile upon the successful rescue of three survivors

witnessing destruction and loss took a toll on everyone. There were shocking moments when the team recovered deceased victims. Psychological debriefing became an essential part of their routine, allowing them to process their experiences and support one another. “We saw families sitting in front of collapsed buildings, waiting for news of their loved ones, overflowing with a sense of helplessness.” Despite this, the team found strength in each other and in the moments when their work led to a successful rescue.

Every deployment brings unique lessons, and the mission in Türkiye was no exception. The extreme cold posed unexpected difficulties, with temperatures dropping below freezing at night. With limited supplies, the team had to improvise ways to stay warm, including using cardboard as insulation and huddling around makeshift fires. Clean water was scarce, making hygiene a challenge. The team had to ration bottled water and adopted innovative methods for sanitation, such as using small amounts of disinfectant wipes for personal hygiene. Mr Stephen Ngai, another nursing officer on the team, mentioned, “Food, simply, was also a concern.” Initially, the team relied on military ration packs, which were practical but monotonous. However, through collaboration with the China Search and Rescue team, they were able to secure hot meals, substantially boosting morale. Looking ahead, Dr Fan advocates for better preparedness and training programmes for medical support teams, emphasising the need for psychological resilience training and logistical pre-planning to enhance efficiency in future deployments.

Amid these challenges, the team found profound moments of impact, especially when the first survivor was found on the fifth day. For Dr Fan, it was incredibly rewarding to see the team’s efforts come to fruition: “Eighty percent of the buildings in the city collapsed. We walked through ruins, knowing that buried beneath were people in dire need of being found. The golden time for survival might have been missed, but the team never gave up. Pulling someone out alive after several days was a feeling I will never forget.”

Dr Fan and her team embody the spirit of selfless service, demonstrating that healthcare professionals are not confined to hospitals and clinics—they are essential pillars in disaster response and humanitarian relief. Their work in Türkiye serves as an inspiring example of how medical expertise, adaptability, and teamwork can make a life-saving difference in the most challenging environments. As crises continue to arise worldwide, their efforts remind us that the true essence of medicine lies in its ability to serve humanity, regardless of borders. The mission of medical support teams is never just about treating

injuries; it is about preserving the health, safety, and dignity of those who put themselves at risk for the sake of others.

The team's efforts have led to lasting institutional and societal impacts. Their experience served as a catalyst for the formation of a dedicated medical team within the Hospital Authority to support the Fire Services Department's Disaster Response and Rescue Team in its efforts to obtain accreditation from the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group. This medical team, comprising orthopaedic and emergency specialists and nurses, underwent humanitarian training and exchange in Beijing, equipping them with essential skills such as mass casualty management, field amputations, and high-stress resuscitation. Their contributions have fortified Hong Kong's capacity to respond to future crises, while inspiring a broader cultural shift towards valuing humanitarian medicine as a professional imperative.

For Dr Fan, the motivation to engage in high-risk humanitarian work transcends professional

duty—it is a reaffirmation of medicine's foundational ethos: to serve where the need is greatest. She candidly reflects on the medical, logistical, and emotional challenges faced in Türkiye, from confronting the limits of intervention in catastrophic settings to navigating psychological stress. Yet, despite these difficulties, Dr Fan and the team emphasised the profound fulfilment of such missions. Their vision for the future is clear: to help cultivate a generation of medically trained humanitarians who are technically proficient, psychologically prepared, and ethically grounded. "When the call comes, answer it," she urges, framing humanitarian service not as an extraordinary sacrifice but as a natural extension of medical vocation—one that enriches both the provider and the profession.

Dr Fan and the team's story is one of extraordinary resilience and commitment. Their experiences in Türkiye reinforce the message that humanitarian medical work is not just an act of service—it is a duty that bridges borders and uplifts humanity in its darkest hours.