

For Good

From her early years as a young surgeon determined to make a difference, to founding the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation, DR POLLY CHEUNG has fused science with empathy, turning medical care into a mission of empowerment.

Words: STEPHANIE IP

Dr Polly Cheung still remembers the first time she watched pain disappear. Posted to the Surgery Department at the University of Hong Kong, she'd gone into an operating theatre with a patient who had acute appendicitis. "She was in a lot of pain and extremely frightened, but right after surgery, everything settled down and she was walking around," Cheung recalls. "That immediate reward from surgery really struck me and that's how I fell in love with surgery."

In the 1970s, surgery wasn't a field that welcomed most women, and with fewer than five women surgeons who practised in the city, colleagues tried to steer Cheung elsewhere – pediatrics was good, or obstetrics and gynecology if she insisted on something surgical. But Cheung ignored them, choosing what she calls "a tough life" in the operating theatre. Her professor guided her into breast and endocrine surgery, and over the years, she would learn that treating a patient is not the same as treating a disease.

One story altered her trajectory. A patient of hers, a 40-year-old woman who happened to be a relative of Cheung's university friend, was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer. Cheung treated her with a mastectomy and reconstruction, then guided her through chemotherapy. "I felt I'd successfully cured her disease," recalls Cheung. "At every follow-up, she'd come back smiling with her husband by her side. She kept asking for sleeping pills, but I didn't understand why."

Cheung then read in a newspaper that her patient had jumped from her apartment and died, and in her note to her husband, wrote that since she couldn't bear him a child, she'd rather end her life so he could remarry. "My friend later told me that her husband never remarried. It's a very sad story," she says.

Out of that loss grew the idea of a different kind of care. Cheung started small in her own clinic, pairing newly diagnosed

women with survivors who shared similar stories – working women who might want support from other professionals, or younger patients who might want to talk about their future, and so on. On Saturdays, they'd gather at Cheung's clinic to share their feelings and support one another.

Those Saturday circles became the seed of the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation. Through the collective effort of patient and doctor volunteers, the HKBCF was incorporated in June 2004, with Cheung listed as founder and Doris Kwan as founding chairperson, and formally inaugurated on March 8, 2025. It was Hong Kong's first non-profit organisation focused on breast cancer.

"We chose International Women's Day to publicly announce the foundation," says Cheung. "Lady Kadoorie kindly agreed to be our patron and singer Frances Yip, herself a survivor, spoke on behalf of breast cancer survivors. Our founding chairperson, another cancer survivor, also joined. At the time, breast cancer was rarely discussed publicly. Women didn't want others to know they had breast cancer because people assumed you'd lose your breast. Our launch was a turning point; survivors spoke to the media about their experiences and their desire to set up a foundation to help others who might follow a similar path. That was our first big step in advocating for breast cancer screening, though the journey afterwards also had its ups and downs."

Their first major setback came almost as soon as the foundation was registered. It had kicked off with the slogan "Early detection saves lives", advising women to go for screenings in line with global trends. In December 2004, the government's Cancer Expert Working Group released its first report, stating that mammogram screening wasn't recommended, due to the lack of local evidence.

Cheung knew international data showed

that organised, government-launched screening with good participation rates can significantly reduce breast cancer mortality by up to 40 percent and shift diagnoses to earlier stages. She'd long advocated for it; in 1990, she helped set up the Well Women Clinic with Tung Wah Hospital Group to provide both mammography and cervical cancer screenings, a hugely successful initiative that's expanded to two centres today.

The 2004 government policy spurred her into action, and by 2007, the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry was set up, with the aim of collecting local data to determine whether breast cancer in Asia differed from those in the West.

Over time, the registry revealed stark disparities: poorer districts had more advanced cancers at diagnosis, while wealthier areas – where women travelled, read international news or had lived overseas – tended to present earlier. In Kwun Tong, one study found that around 35 percent of cases were already stage 3 and 4 before targeted public education and screening collaborations turned things around.

The registry also broke myths around genetics. Only about 10 percent of patients had a family history of breast cancer in first degree relatives, and of those only about 10 percent carried a clearly inherited mutation. "Overall, roughly 95 percent of breast cancers are due not to hereditary genes but somatic changes, environmental, physical and chemical factors that affect the body over time." Screening, Cheung argues, must therefore be for the many, not the few.

It would take nearly two decades of data and lobbying before the government shifted. In 2011, officials moved to a neutral stance, in July 2020, a report eventually recommended risk-based mammogram screening, and in 2021, the Department of Health launched its first pilot programme for average-risk women. Cheung and her team never stopped presenting registry



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results are enrolled into regular two-year screening while those diagnosed with cancer are referred, according to their preference, into public hospitals or private care.

The foundation celebrated its 20th anniversary last year, and marks an annual calendar of moments that all shape up as opportunities for women to speak out and raise awareness – International Women’s Day, Mother’s Day, Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, as well as the foundation’s own Breast Cancer Survivorship Month in May. “Bringing women together is very important. The first group who spoke publicly about their breast cancer experiences had a big impact. When women come together, their voices are stronger,” she says.

For all the policy battles and research papers, the work remains deeply personal for Cheung. Her patients remain close to her heart – her first volunteer nurse counsellor, who took on 80 patients at their peak, and who had literally helped save lives as she pulls them back from the brink of depression. Or a busy professional who knew she had family history, and because of annual testing, was able to catch her cancer early.

I have just one last question, how does she relax? “I recently starting something new – Nordic walking,” Cheung says. “I first saw it when hiking in Europe. You keep your arms at about 90 degrees and walk with poles, and it can be quite a vigorous exercise, especially in the mountains.”

Work is never far from her mind because, as she says, “I started recommending it to my patients. When we talk about post-menopausal women, we discuss bone loss and the need for weight-bearing exercise. Nordic walking shifts weight off the knees and back while strengthening the shoulders and patients have told me it’s very helpful.”

In a way, Nordic walking was perhaps an apt metaphor for the journey she’s offered her patients all these years. You move forward with support at your side, your stride surer because you’re not alone. From her very first appendicitis case to now a foundation that spans research, screening, advocacy and counselling, Cheung shows that when women come together, solitary suffering can be turned into shared strength. 

From top: Dr Polly Cheung in her clinic; the official opening of the HKBCF Jockey Club Breast Health Centre in Kowloon; the ribbon-cutting ceremony on March 8, 2005



analyses, continuing to demonstrate that early-stage diagnoses wasn’t only lifesaving but also cost-saving on the healthcare system.

On the ground, the foundation was building what Cheung had once lacked for her 40-year-old patient: a one-stop, holistic journey. In their two breast-health centres, one in North Point and the other in Ngau Chi Wan, Kowloon, trained nurses sit down with the women to review risk factors and then recommend appropriate imaging. If something abnormal is detected, a biopsy is performed. Women who receive benign

