

Conversations with Pharmacy Leaders in Hong Kong – Skills for Success: Lateral Thinking, Confidence, & The Three Rs

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ABSTRACT

Professor Ian Wong, currently the Head of Department of Pharmacology & Pharmacy at The University of Hong Kong, shares his secret to his success as a pharmacist, educator, and researcher. After establishing his career as a pharmacist focusing on research in the U.K., Professor Wong returned to Hong Kong in 2011 to be close to his family. At the same time, he continued his research on ADHD, which has shaped the medical field's understanding of methylphenidate (Ritalin). Named “the father of healthcare big data research in Hong Kong” by Lancet Psychiatry, Professor Wong collaborated with other healthcare professionals to set up the Centre for Safe Medication Practice and Research. He utilized his knowledge and skills in big data to monitor the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, which earned him a commendation from the Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2022. In this interview article, Professor Wong shares his thoughts and experiences, hoping to provoke the next generation of pharmacists to think out of the box.



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INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR IAN WONG

When asked why he chose to become a pharmacist, Professor Wong shared that he was the first person in his family to attend university. Although he did not excel academically at a young age, he was always interested in physics, chemistry, and biology, so he wanted to pursue a degree and career that would allow him to learn and apply his scientific knowledge. Pharmacy is a medical field where he can utilize his scientific knowledge and also with job security, so he felt it was only logical for him to study pharmacy in Sunderland, U.K.

Reviewing his academic journey, Professor Wong mentioned that universities overseas focus more on understanding, whereas schools in Hong Kong focus

more on exam techniques and memorizing. The two vastly different learning experiences influenced his view of education and shaped his vision as an educator. Traditionally, professors put a strong emphasis on attendance for lectures, which is a form of massive information transfer. While 100% attendance may increase a student's chance of getting good grades, it is not the only determinant. Instead of focusing on lecture attendance, he believes educators should be “learning focused” - to help students learn and achieve their learning outcomes. An educator should act as a “catalyst” to drive students to think about new ideas or initiatives and what they can improve on. His vision of education led to his participation in Hong Kong University's Lead for Life program - which aims to teach undergraduate students about leadership skills and cultivate leaders who can use their potential to positively impact society.

When asked about the secret behind his success, Professor Wong shared that he holds one main thought - “The Three Rs” - close to his heart.

RESPECT is defined as a deep admiration or esteem for someone or something, recognizing their worth, value, and dignity. Professor Wong strongly believes in treating others with kindness, consideration, and appreciation. He emphasizes the importance of each and every individual in our society - everybody has their responsibility. An example given was janitors, who work tirelessly day and night to keep our public areas and streets clean, greatly contribute to public health. Without proper hygiene, many infectious diseases that are no longer considered a threat to public health would be out of control, putting a heavier strain on not only the healthcare industry but the entire Hong Kong community.

RESILIENCE is the ability of an individual to cope with adversity, adapt to change, and bounce back from challenging situations - and turn these situations into opportunities for growth and development.

To build resilience, Professor Wong shares his tips “**NEVER**”, which stands for Network, Embrace change, Vision, Enjoyment, and Reflect. Network refers to your friends and family who will be your backup force during crisis. Also, as pharmacists, we should always network with people from different backgrounds in order to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and collaborations,

which could lead to novel and innovative ideas. Secondly, as the world is constantly moving forward, it is crucial to embrace change. Many people do not know or understand why change occurs - but if changes are unavoidable, why not change for the better? When you feel miserable, recall your vision and calling in life. These can give you the direction and energy to carry on. Moreover, in a society emphasizing efficiency and performance, we should never forget to stop and enjoy the little things in life. Lastly, we should regularly reflect on our actions instead of just listening to others' comments. Learning from our mistakes and identifying weaknesses can allow us to grow.

The life events of Professor Wong illustrate the essence of resilience and how to grasp the opportunities arising from changes. When he started his career in the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), he was introduced to the concept of pharmacovigilance and the use of electronic medical records. At that time, electronic records were very new, marking a new future for medical research and drug safety. In the time of constant development and growth of big data in research, Professor Wong was able to adapt and use it to grow as a researcher. As clinical trials are often difficult to conduct in pediatric populations and mental health, he came up with the idea to use big data to further research interests and generate new knowledge for the scientific community.

An example of utilizing big data to generate new knowledge would be one of his publications in *The Lancet Psychiatry* on the risk of self-harm after the diagnosis of psychiatric disorders in Hong Kong, which is the first attempt at investigating the risk of self-harm after a first-recorded diagnosis of psychiatric disorder in a Chinese population. Results revealed that those who were diagnosed with psychiatric disorders are significantly associated with an elevated risk of self-harm, and patients with a history of substance misuse or dependence were identified to have the highest risk. The research evidence can inform the development of more effective and targeted preventive measures in psychiatric care management, with special attention provided to patients who may be at a higher risk of engaging in self-harm.

A more recent example of Professor Wong's research is using big data to help monitor the safety of COVID-19 vaccines. In the past, Professor Wong did not do much research in vaccine. When asked what gave him the push to participate in the safety monitoring of COVID-19 vaccines, Professor Wong simply said, "I see the need, and I can do it, so why not?" Also, he mentioned the concept of "Lateral Thinking". People usually strive to run straight towards the goal and overcome all the hurdles along the road, but there are actually other alternative paths on the side that can lead to your goal. "**Lateral thinking**" involves thinking outside the box and looking at problems from new angles to gain insights and find innovative solutions. This concept gave him the drive and confidence to utilize the data for public health.

RESOLUTENESS is being determined, unwavering, and steadfast in one's decisions, beliefs, and goals. This particular attribute highlights the importance of having

a strong sense of purpose and commitment, and being persistent in the face of obstacles.

In terms of research, Professor Wong mentioned that since the Center of Safe Medication Practice and Research is a "live" center, the research agenda changes constantly. However, the philosophy stays the same - to improve patient health and quality of life through interdisciplinary collaborative research. He strongly believes that academics should always work together with practitioners to discuss whether the ongoing research is relevant to real-world practices, and vice versa. Professor Wong spent the past decade focusing on medication use in children diagnosed with ADHD. Although many people do not believe that ADHD is real, he is steadfast in his belief. He sticks to his vision that medication research is important to look at the best way to provide individualized care to newly diagnosed children, or those who do not respond effectively to methylphenidate. Through his big data research, he has shaped our knowledge and understanding of methylphenidate (Ritalin).

Finally, when asked what he would like to share with current or aspiring pharmacists, Professor Wong shared that many people may not see the importance of a pharmacist within our society. However, as pharmacists, we can determine how we influence society. It is normal that humans tend to form habits and routines because when we repeat the same thing, our brains will start to form circuits, and efficiency will increase. However, we will become more rigid as we only repeat the same things we know over and over again. Limiting ourselves within the circuits, then there will be no innovations and breakthroughs. Professor Wong encouraged us to step out of the circuits by learning one skill or piece of knowledge and trying to practice it. For example, something as simple as reading one leadership book per year and take one important take home message to practice. Within a few years, we would have gained a few new thinking and good habits that greatly influence our skills as an individual.

CONCLUSION

Professor Ian Wong shares two ideas - "The Three Rs" and "NEVER" - that have helped him thrive as a pharmacist, educator, and researcher. He shares his experience in the U.K. and Hong Kong, and how they have shaped his views and vision throughout the years. Finally, he closes with the thought on how everyone can determine how they influence society through self-improvement, thinking outside the box, and most importantly, by believing in themselves.

Author's background

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