

Heartware zone

Ex-corporate honcho Koh Poh Tiong is redirecting his outcome-oriented approach in business to his public service work

By GENEVIEVE CUA



PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

FORMER head honcho Koh Poh Tiong is in “a new season” of his life. He retired from an executive function after more than four decades of corporate life, most notably 23 years as chief executive of Asia Pacific Breweries (APB). But today he seems busier than ever. He sits on nine boards. He is, for instance, chairman and senior adviser at Ezra Holdings, and a director of Raffles Medical Group and SATS Holdings, among others.

Yet the commitments that appear closest to his heart are those that pay him nothing: He is chairman of the National Kidney Foundation (NKF), and council chairman of the Singapore Kindness Movement.

Former NKF chairman Gerard Ee roped him into the NKF charity in 2011. “We all retired at 62 at APB, and I joined F&N (Fraser & Neave) for three years. I thought that was it; I didn’t want an executive role anymore.

“Then Gerard spoke to me. I have the latitude of time. I asked myself – there is so much suffering in this world. How can I do my part? I spend a lot of time here (at NKF). This is a new season of my private life.”

Yet the penchant to give isn’t just an urge, borne of the luxury of time post-retirement. Through the years, he has served on the Singapore Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee, the Singapore Sports Council and the Football Association of Singapore. He was conferred the Public Service Medal and the Service to Education Medal in 2007.

Doing good dates back to his school years. He recounts his boyhood days as a scout. “We had to tie a handkerchief into a knot every day as a reminder to do a good deed. So, consciously I tell myself to do a good deed. I may see someone on the street,

give him a lift, open a door for you, a simple thing. Or, you can tie two, three knots. If we are conscious about this, it will be a better society for us.”

Today, Mr Koh is an eloquent champion of the NKF; he knows its grim statistics by heart. Moving round the dialysis room, he proffers a gentle hand and is greeted warmly by nursing staff and patients. “What makes me want to do this and continue? Often I see the hopelessness in patients’ faces, but we also have many patients who are very positive despite their problems.

“In Singapore today there are 6,000 people with kidney failure and undergoing dialysis. NKF looks after 3,600 or 60 per cent. Of that, 99 per cent are low income... Every day there are 4.7 cases of kidney failure. Every five hours one person has kidney failure and will need dialysis.

“Many are so poor. That’s why we need to continue to raise funds. If we stop raising funds, we’re finished. No poor person should be deprived of dialysis for reason of no money or no space.”

Public donations have in fact dropped since the defamation lawsuit against Singapore Press Holdings in 2005. The suit, which the NKF lost, unleashed a slew of actions, including an independent audit of its accounts and a new corporate governance structure under its then-interim chairman Mr Ee.

Based on NKF data, total income, which includes donations, peaked in 2004. In that year, NKF income totalled S\$108.7 million, of which S\$73.3 million were donations. In the fiscal year ending in June 2014, total income came to S\$76.9 million, and donations S\$21.4 million – 70 per cent less than 2004.

By the end of this year there will be 29 dialysis centres, costing an estimated S\$100 million to run. Ambulance services cost S\$1 million a year.

Mr Koh is mulling a sharp escalation of the charity's model for dialysis centres, in order to reach yet more patients. At the moment the NKF operates on a "satellite" model, where dialysis centres are based in housing estates, where space is limited.

"Diabetes is on the rise. We have a terrible reputation in Singapore – we are number one for diabetes-induced kidney failure. Today, Singapore has 400,000 diabetics. The forecast for 2040 is one million. If we have one million diabetics in a population of five or six million, that's one in five or six people. How many will get kidney failure?"

"I think we may have to build centres for 100, 200 people... We can't afford small void decks. It's also difficult to get void decks. Residents say – not in my backyard. It may have to be located further out, in industrial parks. Then, how do you transport patients? How do I start planning now, for more doctors and nurses? What is the outcome and the process? I'm an outcome and process person."

Mr Koh says his outcome-oriented approach in business has helped in his public service work. He narrates an account by a pastor which he heard in a US television show some years ago. A train station master was alarmed to discover one morning that a bridge had collapsed. He rushed to warn the oncoming train, frantically waving a red flag that he had kept in a cupboard. But the train failed to stop and many were killed.

In the court of enquiry it emerged that the train driver failed to see the flag because the red had faded markedly. "That story helped me a lot. Whatever you want to do in business, you have to be very clear what you want to do and your strategy, like a red flag. If you are not clear, if the flag is pinkish, you are in trouble."

A case in point is the Singapore Kindness Movement (SKM), formed in 1997 with the aim of nurturing a kind and gracious Singapore. It is, he says, the most difficult job he has taken on. He saw the movement's mission as a way to build the "heartware" of Singapore, which will over time make it a more pleasant place to live and do business. "We have reason to be proud of our success in building infrastructure and systems that work. It is good to have hardware, and it's even better when that is complemented by heartware, which is what SKM is about."

One of his first moves when he came on board as council chairman in 2008 was to establish a KPI (key performance indicator). "Kindness is, first, very difficult to measure, unlike business which has KPIs – 10 per cent profit, 50 per cent market share."

Under his watch the group came up with an annual graciousness survey to track the perception and experience of kindness based on perception and experience indicators. The survey results are reflected in the Graciousness Index. The Index has moved up from 55 in 2014 to 61 in 2015.

"The index has been hovering at about 60 per cent. At last I have a measurement; it's not perfect... I'm interested in the trend. If the trend is 60.2 one year, and 60.3 the next, that's encouraging. You can't be a kind person one day and unkind the next day. It's like religion. It takes time. If we can improve our character bit by bit each day, that's good enough."

The index's low point was in 2013, when it fell eight points to 53. "Researchers told me the main reason was anti-foreigner sentiment. Today at the NKF 70 per cent of our nurses are foreign, mainly from five countries... Without them, who will look after the patients? I tell them, don't be too upset about what you read on anti-foreigner sentiment. I think maybe it is a freak result. Generally the trend is 60 per cent. People are nicer." 

'It is important to live life to the fullest and to share it with others who make a difference. That is why the ultimate legacy we can leave behind is what we do for people around us.'

Better to give than to receive

KOH Poh Tiong went from an outstanding student in primary school to a rebellious teen who literally tumbled to the bottom rank in his Secondary 3 level.

That, however, spurred him to pick up the pieces, he said in a commencement address to graduands of the National University of Singapore in 2013.

"I was ranked 44 out of 44 students. I remember vividly the teacher telling me in front of the whole class that I would never pass my 'O' level examinations. I felt humiliated. It was a strong wake up call. But I did not panic... I studied extremely hard, and the rest is history."

Mr Koh served as chief executive of Asia Pacific Breweries from 1993 to 2008. In 1998, he was named outstanding chief executive at the Singapore Business Awards. He spent three years as chief executive of Fraser & Neave (food and beverage division) before retiring in 2011.

In addition to a number of directorships, he is currently chairman of the National Kidney Foundation (NKF), and council chairman of the Singapore Kindness Movement (SKM).

In his address, he urged the graduands to become a "person of substance". "There is too much superficiality around us. We need to make a difference by being a person of substance. By this I mean

the development and nurturing of one's character. It's said that when you sow a character you reap a destiny.

"Topping the list of a person's substance is a humble disposition, followed by respect and graciousness to people around you; a vigorous work and moral ethic; an attitude of gratitude and kindness to the poor, sick and marginalised."

He said that these noble qualities often fall through the cracks. "It is through my daily quiet times of reflection and planning that I am able to centre down and recover these values."

He said that some people have asked him why he spends time at the NKF and SKM. "My answer is simple: 'The sick cannot help the sick; and the poor cannot help the poor. We, who are blessed with much, have a duty to take care of those who are suffering around us.'"

He adds: "It is more blessed to give than to receive. Life is fragile and short. It is important to live it to the fullest and to share it with others who make a difference. That is why the ultimate legacy we can leave behind is what we do for people around us."

"Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and one of the greatest minds of antiquity, once said: 'The only wealth which you will keep forever is the wealth you have given away.'" 

