

MIND **with** BODY  
Survivor

**T**he prospect of losing their voice after surgery for smoking-related cancer made two men depressed but their doctors persisted in helping them regain their zest.

Today, the two men, once heavy smokers, are "voices" for the New Voice Club, which provides support for people who had surgery to treat laryngeal cancer.

One of these men, Mr Tang Jin, now 64, recalled that 11 years ago, he became despondent after being diagnosed with laryngeal cancer, which affects the larynx, or voicebox.

"I didn't want to have an operation. I just wanted to die," the former cleaner said in Mandarin.

He was 53 years old and smoked two packs of cigarettes a day.

However, his doctor was not about to give up on him and, after much dogged persuasion, convinced him to go for a laryngectomy - which removed the larynx but also left him without his vocal cords.

"I was very frustrated after the operation. Losing my voice was very difficult," he said. The surgery also left a small hole in his throat.

To enable Mr Tang to speak, a tracheoesophageal puncture (TEP) - an incision between the trachea and the oesophagus - was made to fit in a small valve.

The valve, made of plastic or silicone, has to be taken out to be cleaned every day.

Today, Mr Tang paints a positive picture of a person who has learnt how to look past his problems and renew his zest for life. He quit smoking and has been cancer-free for the past 11 years.

"I am alive today because my doctor never gave up on me although I was very stubborn and refused treatment," he said.

Sadly, his doctor died in a car accident while holidaying in Europe. "I cried when I heard the news. I was the one with cancer and he died before me," Mr Tang said.

His wife died in 2005 of cancer and he has two sons and a daughter.

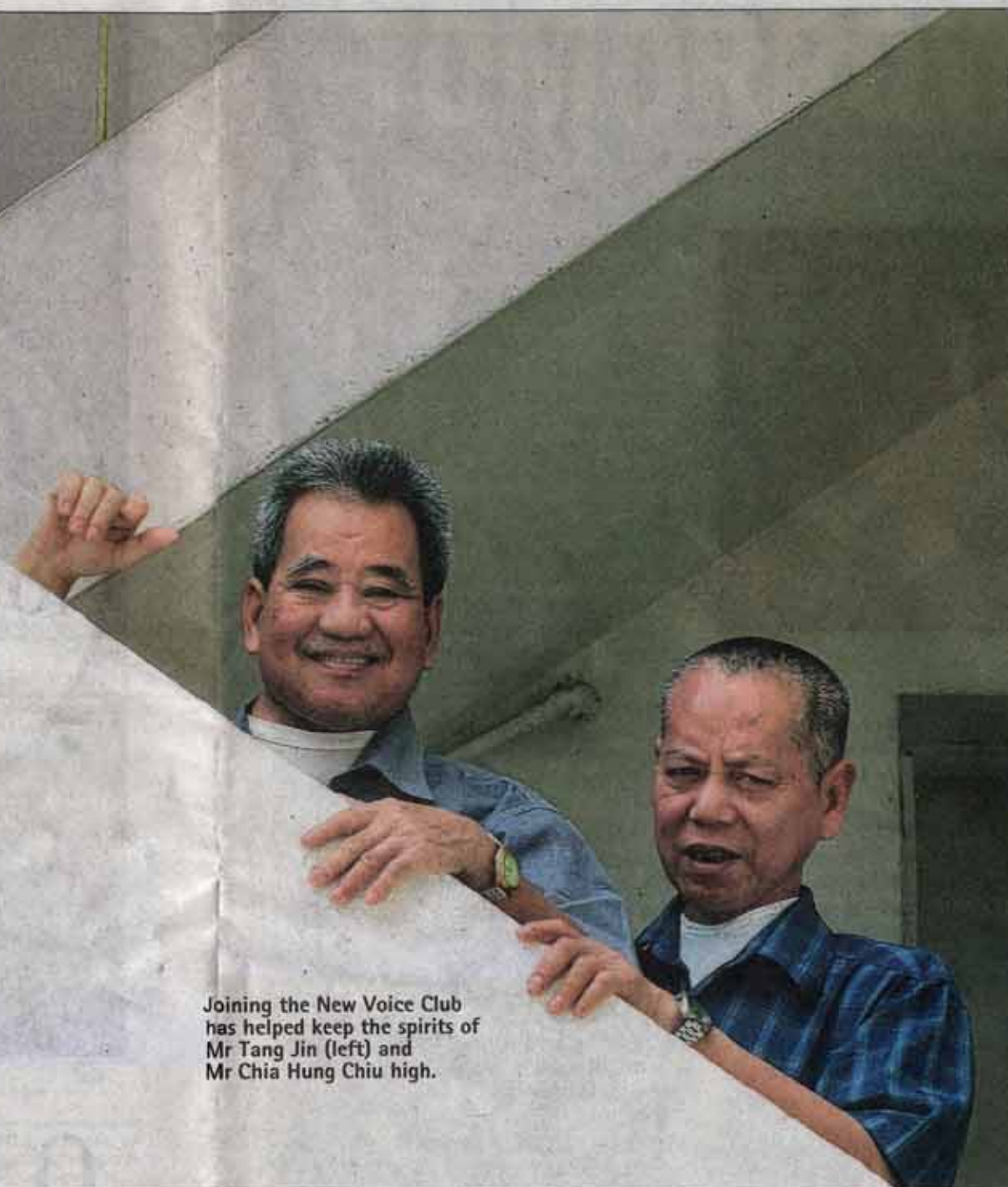
Mr Tang, who does not have a job, used to live with the younger son but has since moved to his elder brother's house. He has applied for a Housing Board flat under his name to share with his unmarried daughter, whom he described as "very filial".

Like Mr Tang, Mr Chia Hung Chiu was a

# Vocal about their cause

Mr Tang Jin and Mr Chia Hung Chiu lost their voiceboxes after cancer treatment. Yet they remain optimistic and volunteer now at the New Voice Club. ALVIN LIM reports

Joining the New Voice Club has helped keep the spirits of Mr Tang Jin (left) and Mr Chia Hung Chiu high.



ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

heavy smoker diagnosed with laryngeal cancer in 1993.

Now 61, the former delivery driver was making his rounds one day when he felt that there was "something wrong" with his body.

Said Mr Chia: "I was lucky. The doctor told me that I could have died if I had waited any longer."

In his case, he was initially treated with radiation but a relapse two years later led to a similar operation Mr Tang underwent to remove his voicebox.

Mr Chia now uses a servox (a battery-powered voice amplifier) or just pen and paper to communicate.

He could initially use the TEP valve to speak but it had to be removed later due to complications.

A bachelor, Mr Chia lives with his 43-year-old brother, who is also single, in a Whampoa HDB flat.

He now works as a storekeeper in an industrial park in Henderson.

Almost 90 per cent of cancers in oral

cavities or the throat are caused by heavy smoking.

Both Mr Tang and Mr Chia said they have benefited much from their membership in the New Voice Club which is run by the Singapore Cancer Society (SCS).

They were encouraged by their respective doctors to join the club to learn how to speak again, with or without speech devices.

The club, set up in 1985, meets every Tuesday at the SCS premises in Enggor Street for speech training and activities such as table tennis.

Mr Tang and Mr Chia are active in the club, providing counselling and speech training to new patients.

"We can understand their pain. Being unable to speak is frustrating. Some even thought of committing suicide," said Mr Tang.

Echoing his sentiment, Mr Chia said: "Now that we've learnt how to speak, we can be an encouragement to the new patients. We were once like them."

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## Nose cancer is No. 6 killer among men here

Nose cancer is in the top 10 list of deadliest cancers among men in Singapore.

Also called nasopharyngeal cancer (NPC), nose cancer originates from a space behind the nose called the nasopharynx.

There are several cancer groups for the head and neck region.

Apart from NPC, others include cancer of the larynx (voicebox), other oral cavity cancers such as the mouth and throat, thyroid cancer and salivary gland cancer.

Statistics from the Singapore Cancer Registry of cases between 2001 and 2005 show that nose cancer is ranked sixth among the 10 that men here are most likely to get.

The five deadliest, in order, are: colorectal, lung, prostate, liver and stomach cancers.

Nose cancer accounts for 5 per cent of cancer deaths among men and 1.9 per cent among women here, said head and neck surgeon Professor Christopher Goh.

He is head and senior consultant of ear, nose and throat (ENT) at the department of otolaryngology,

Singapore General Hospital.

Men are more prone to getting head and neck cancers, with a ratio of four to one.

Professor Soo Khee Chee, director of the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS), said that by the time many of his patients come to see him, their cancer is already in a relatively advanced stage.

"Some people may not have paid enough attention to the symptoms," he said.

He added that symptoms for the common head and neck cancers are discernible.

For NPC, these include bleeding or obstruction of the nose, ringing in the ears and partial deafness. Lymph node

swelling is also common in nose cancers.

A tumour blocking the eustachian tube, which connects the ear to the nose, may also cause the "airplane ear" syndrome - pain in the ear due to air pressure - commonly experienced by passengers on planes.

For larynx (voicebox) cancer, patients may experience persistent hoarseness in the voice and sometimes cough too.

Most head and neck cancers can be treated with surgery and radiation therapy, said Prof Goh.

At an early stage, either surgery or radiotherapy may be possible.

"Advanced stage disease usually requires a combination of surgery and radiation therapy," he added.

NCCS' Prof Soo said that eating too much preserved and salty food could give rise to NPC.

Heavy drinkers and smokers are at the greatest risk of head and neck cancer.

About 90 per cent of oral cavity and throat cancers are linked to smoking and drinking.

Alvin Lim

Almost **90%** of cancers in oral cavities or the throat are caused by heavy smoking

Nose cancer accounts for **5%** of cancer deaths among men and **1.9%** among women