

# FOREWORD

Chow Shew Ping

Professor Emeritus, University of Hong Kong, Dean of Medicine, 1995–1998

Arthur van Langenberg is well known among the gardeners in Hong Kong. However, they may not know how respected a surgeon he is, in particular his caring approach to patients. This book will give them a glimpse of the medical aspect of this seasoned gardener. They will be pleasantly surprised to learn of the intriguing career of a surgeon, from his student days to his overseas training, from working with the University to working in the private sector. The real-life stories that he has recorded are so captivating. I am sure that given Arthur's writing skill, he could turn each story into a single volume.

For the surgeons in Hong Kong, all those encounters are familiar, especially among the more senior ones. The intimidating Professor M and the fiery Professor O bring back very similar feelings to those who had experience of them. Many also already know that Arthur is a good gardener, but they would not realise that gardening can elevate one's life to a spiritual level. Unless they read this book.

I have known Arthur for 55 years, first as his student in medical school, later as his trainee in general surgery, and then as a life-long friend since. After reading through this book, however, I realised there were things that I could still learn from him to enrich my life. Gardening would be an important one.

What Arthur has gone through in his life reflects what Hong Kong has gone through since the Second World War, from a colonial trading port, to rapid growth and modernisation in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, to becoming a world financial centre, and then the return to China. Hong Kong has also seen an increasing polarisation of our society due to disparities in political inclination, the rich-poor divide, and the young and old value differences. To transcend all these, perhaps we should all be acutely aware of the looming environmental threat and become more at one with nature and with each other. When you read through the last chapter of this book, this sentiment is plainly evident.

And as I finished the last chapter and closed the book, the words of the Six Dynasties poet, Tao Qian (陶潛), suddenly emerged:

採菊東籬下，悠然見南山

I gather chrysanthemums beneath the hedge on the east;  
My heart at ease and, the distant South Mountain, I see.\*

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\* Translated by Andrew W. F. Wong.

# FOREWORD\*

**Dr Kwan Po Yuen** | General medical practitioner and avid gardener

關寶源 | 普通科醫生、種植愛好者

At the age of 75, I have a lot of friends, but amongst them there are only two whom I respect as being my idols. Dr Langenberg is one of them.

This book, *From Scalpel to Spade*, is a special kind of memoir. In it, he tells of his life as both a great surgeon and a great urban gardener. In particular, he shares with readers how to be a doctor with personal integrity, and I believe that every doctor in Hong Kong can learn something from this book.

I first met him when he was my teacher in my student days at the University of Hong Kong, and have known him ever since—for more than 50 years now. In the past ten years, when I discovered that we both like gardening, we have seen each other more often and become closer friends. Whenever I have a difficult question about surgery or gardening, I immediately seek his help. Many people like to visit his home, including myself, because besides enjoying seeing his garden, we always get a warm welcome with delicious food straight from the garden.

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\* This foreword was originally written in Chinese.

Dr Langenberg is a legend in the Hong Kong medical world. He is a highly experienced and skilled surgeon, and is still practicing into his eighties. This book tells the story of his life, from his student days at the University of Hong Kong in the 1950s, to gaining a prestigious surgical scholarship to study in England, and then later returning to Hong Kong to join the University Surgical Unit as a lecturer, all described in a manner that is both moving and meticulously recorded. Indeed, I'm so impressed at his ability to remember so many things in detail from as long as 60 years ago!

And then there's the question of his nationality. He looks Chinese and he speaks fluent Cantonese, but having a 'van' in his name makes him sound somehow Dutch. He is actually a Portuguese national, and spent the war years in Macau. I think he cannot read and write much Chinese. I once plucked up my courage and asked him whether or not he knows Portuguese, and he just smiled.

Besides gardening, another of his hobbies is reading English books—he reads an amazing number, around 50 per year. His outstanding English is very evident in this volume.

Dr Langenberg is very gentle, soft-spoken, and is polite to everyone. But this doesn't mean he is given to compromise. He is very concerned with group discussion and learning, so as to find out the best way to treat patients. This put him in a very difficult position with the head of his department when he was vocally critical of questionable practices at that time. This made him decide to leave the University for private practice after a few years.

Since Dr Langenberg is very nice, he has a lot of friends, including medical colleagues, patients both rich and poor, and even passers-by who are attracted to his garden and welcomed in. In these

pages, he relates many interesting stories of these friends, as well as some incredible moments from his 60 years of medical practice.

I always remember his favourite saying about conduct as a surgeon, which goes like this:

A good surgeon knows how to operate.

A better surgeon knows when to operate.

The best surgeon knows when not to operate.

In addition to this book, Dr Langenberg has published two other wonderful books about gardening that I highly recommend—*Urban Gardening: A Hong Kong Gardener's Journal* and *Growing Your Own Food in Hong Kong*. I guarantee that you will enjoy them!

人生過了四分三世紀，結識了不少的朋友，但在這友群中能被自己認為是偶像級的，只有兩位。其中一位就是梁雅達醫生了。

這本 *From Scalpel to Spade* 可以說是一本特別的傳記，梁雅達醫生敘述了他自己，一位偉大的外科醫生又是城市園藝大師的故事。此書內有提及做醫生的操守，我想全香港的醫生都應該一讀。

我認識梁醫生，是從做他的學生起，至今已五十多年。到現在最近十年，因大家都喜歡園藝而成為較常見的朋友，我由外科上的難題到栽花種菜的事情都不免時時要找他幫忙。他家的花園就是我及很多其他人經常探訪的地方。而他因必然在家，亦來者不拒，到後必有豐盛招待，所以極受我們歡迎。

他外貌像中國人，又能說流利廣東話，但本身英文名因有一個 van 字，又可能和荷蘭有點連繫。我曾大膽的問他會不會葡文，他則笑而不語。我想應該不懂。而他因姓 Langenberg，他的花名「連根拔」則是無人不知了。

除園藝外，他的另外一嗜好就是閱讀英文書，達到每年 50 本，即約一星期一本，簡直驚人。他的英文如此出眾，一定由此而來。

梁醫生溫文爾雅，從不大聲說話，對任何人都和藹可親。但這不表示他對什麼都妥協。他非常著重學術的研究、集體討論以及找出最佳的醫治方法，但在 70 年代他在香港大學做外科講師時因不獲當時的教授認同而要離開。此事他亦有在書內提及。

梁醫生由於人好，相識遍天下，包括他醫學上的朋友，他的病人，貧富都有，亦有經過他的花園受吸引而入內一觀的途人。他在書中亦提及和一些朋友的小故事，及在他在 60 年中見過極不尋常而值得警惕的醫療事故。他的名言就是：

A good surgeon knows how to operate.

A better surgeon knows when to operate.

The best surgeon knows when not to operate.

甚有深意。所有的醫生都應引此為鑑。

看完這本書後，一定意猶未盡，想知道梁醫生對園藝的貢獻及精闢見解嗎？有兩本梁醫生以前寫的關於園藝的書大家不要錯過，買來看看，就是 *Urban Gardening: A Hong Kong Gardener's Journal* 和 *Growing Your Own Food in Hong Kong* 啦。

# PREFACE

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope that your road is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.

These are the first lines of 'Ithaka', one of my favourite poems, by the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy. In this book I attempt to set out some of these adventures and discoveries that have enriched or at least influenced my life, always hoping they may be of some interest to the reader.

Surgical training sets one on an arduous course. At times the limit of one's endurance is severely tested by long hours, lack of sleep, matters of life and death, while keeping up to speed with the latest developments. However, once embarked on this journey, one seems to be swept along by an exhilarating force, driven by a metaphorical fuel that seems never to run out—rather like some heady wine that, once sampled, only whets the appetite for more. But run out it must—one day. Then a new door opens, inviting me into my garden.

I have always harboured some reservations with books written in the first person. In these books, while plain truth would form a good part, there would a large chunk of embellished truth, alas,

inevitable. Next there would be large gaps of omitted facts, perhaps too painful for the author to resurrect or too embarrassing to hang out to wash. Finally, there is a substantial helping of pure fiction.

This book is not an autobiography, rather a sort of memoir at most, but since it is a first-person book, I hope the reader has been properly forewarned. Fiction I have managed to eliminate almost completely, or at least where it has crept through little chinks in the armour, it is instantly recognisable as such: a few constructs here and there, tongue-in-cheek, to liven up an otherwise dull passage or to coax a reluctant smile out of a sceptical reader.

Only a few real names appear, otherwise people are represented by initials. Some of these initials are sufficient to identify the person—I have not attempted to paste over anyone and I stand by whatever I have written.

I continue on my way to Ithaka. It beckons. I am almost there.

Arthur van Langenberg

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Until it sees the light of day as a published physical entity, a book's manuscript continues to be a work in progress. During this time it is subjected to oversight by a number of trusted people all engaged in making it presentable by smoothing out its rough edges. Chief among this group is my wife Nim Yin who has an uncanny ability to spot problems where I see none. If this book meets readers' expectations it is largely thanks to her keen eye.

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