

Meant for more: The journey, so far, of Dr Remo Aguilar



Dr Aguilar photo-hiking on Mt. Hibok-Hibok, Camiguin Island's volcano.

DR LIGAYA SOLERA

Some people dream of becoming a doctor but never get the chance to go to medical school because of poverty. For Dr Remo-tito Aguilar – Chief of Clinics at St. Louis Hospital in Tacurong City, visiting consultant at Southern Philippines Medical Center in Davao City, board-certified orthopedic surgeon, urban farmer, trekker, photographer, prolific blogger, and passionate advocate for the use of social media in healthcare – it was the other way around.

“Financial difficulties got me into scholar-

ships in pre-med and medicine at UP,” Aguilar recalled. “I wanted to be an electronics and computer engineer.”

It was only during second year of medical school that he fully decided to become a doctor. “I only wanted a college education but was given more than that. I figured that if I made it that far with the free education I’m getting, I might as well finish med school.”

“You can’t quit life”

But tuition is only half the battle of medical school, as everyone who has been through it knows – perhaps not even half. The taxing

schedule, the tough exams, the whole experience takes its toll on even the smartest, most affluent students. In Aguilar's case, there was one other, more basic thing to worry about: food.

"The hardest part of med school for me – and this is the part when I cringed and said, 'Damn, I should have just taken a job' – was taking an exam or going to school on an empty stomach. Scholarship stipends and allowances were always delayed; aside from that, they were always insufficient. While most of my classmates were burning time studying, I was doing odd jobs – part time teller, service crew, tutor, examiner and student med rep – to feed myself and help pay for med school expenses. But I couldn't quit. Even in failing."

It actually helped that, early on, Aguilar's life was fraught with challenges. "The storyline is the same, from high school to med school. Our mom could barely send us to college. I was there in school to prove to everyone and to myself that poverty is never an excuse for not getting the education that you wanted.

"Maybe because I was in early into the challenges of life and survived it, I viewed difficulties in med school as just another challenge I have to get over, on a daily basis. I viewed med school and training as just part of my life. And you can't quit life."

Things eventually got better during training. "With part of my financial difficulties eased – I now had my salary – I gained more confidence that I could survive any challenge thrown at me. No matter how hard, how tough it could be, I would only quit if I'm dead."



Giving back to the community

This eager and wholehearted attitude towards life helps him thrive in his chosen medical career. He is now the chief of clinics of a tertiary hospital in his hometown of Tacurong City and is an attending orthopedic surgeon in various hospitals around the South Central Mindanao region.

The visual nature of orthopedics was what attracted Aguilar to his chosen field. "I'm a very visual person. Orthopedics is a visual field. The idea of fixing a human part for it to function again appealed to me. It's also easy talking to patients when you're holding a visual reference, like x-rays or bone models, to help them understand how parts of their body work. The immediate tangible and visual correction you get with orthopedic surgery brings me immense satisfaction."

More importantly, said Aguilar, his hometown needed an orthopedic surgeon. "When I started med school, I promised myself that if I survived, I would go back to my community and share what life has taught me. So I did."

Aguilar said he has been "paid" in chickens, pork meat, rice and fruits, among other unconventional professional fees. Once he was given a tennis racket by an amputee patient who

thought he played tennis. “He asked me if we can play on opposing ends when he is comfortable with his artificial leg. I actually tried and trained for tennis because of that.”

The expensive healthcare system and lack of proper health education are the challenges Aguilar encounters the most in his practice. “Our medical education is so dependent on expensive Western technologies, but there’s a large disparity between what is an ideal Western treatment and what our poor patients can afford.”

Asked if he has ever entertained the notion of working in the Philippine capital or even outside the country, Aguilar pointed out, “I survived half of my life on bare essentials. Why would I need to work in urban areas or abroad to serve humanity? Money? I have yet to see a starving physician in the Philippines. Besides,” Aguilar added. “Working in rural areas gives me ample time to enjoy my family and the other endeavors I’m passionate about.”

Life outside medicine

“I love travelling, trekking and photography,” Aguilar said. “Lately I added urban farming.” Not only does Aguilar engage in these pastimes, he writes about them as well. He has a medical blog, a hiking blog, a photography blog, and a community blog for Tacurong City, all of which have won recognition from the government or awards from fellow enthusiasts.

Where does he find the time to do all of these? “I make time,” said Aguilar. “I travel, hike or photo shoot around official business trips, like conventions. I extend my leave before and after these trips, so I can get recharged. I tailor

out my clinic and surgeries schedule outside of those extended trips.”

He also tries to incorporate these interests into his daily life. “I wake up each day, looking forward to an early bike or hike when I could, then go back to my garden to water plants. I bring my small camera to work, shooting scenes on the way.”

With all his interests and achievements, is there anything in particular that is still on his bucket list? “Photo-hike a mountain crater in Mars!”

On a more serious note, Aguilar said, “I’ve always wanted to be an innovator, someone who makes things easier and beneficial for a whole lot of people. I’ve always loved technology so I’m drawn to that field. Maybe be part of a team that will develop technology that will make my work easier and provide better access to healthcare for my patients.”

Social media and healthcare advocacy

One of Aguilar’s priority projects these days is #HealthXPh, a movement he co-founded that aims to harness synergies between healthcare and social media. Just recently, Aguilar and his other co-founders were at the Philippine College of Physicians’ Annual Convention to talk about their advocacy.

“As a physician,” explained Aguilar, “we are taught a lifelong pursuit of excellence in four areas – service, training, education, research. The impact of social media is so tremendous, it has affected all these areas to potentially make healthcare better. In the areas of service for example, social media has placed a greater voice

for patients in the equation of health. In training and education, social media has made access to health learning so fast, easy and less expensive, it will be a shame not to take part in it. With #HealthXPh, we hope many Filipino physicians and patients get empowered by social media and emerging technologies to improve our healthcare system.”

Ultimately, that’s what it’s all about for Aguilar – doing his best to make the world a better place to live in, cliché as that may seem. He encourages young doctors to take on new challenges, prioritizing patients, but also making room for personal endeavors. “Don’t worry about income,” said Aguilar. “It will come – in kind, and in kindness.” 