

to cope with living in Cambodia.”

Feeling a stronger call to medicine, Mr Cheng applied for medical training in Birmingham and was offered direct entry to the second year. “Hilary supported me during that time,” Mr Cheng explains. “She was the rice-winner as midwife, then, when she was promoted, as infertility sister.”

Mrs Cheng then felt a call to candidate for the Methodist ministry and the family jokes about the changing titles of the couple.

“I started as a Mr, then became a Dr, then when I became a surgeon, went back to Mr,” says Mr Cheng; “Whereas Hilary was Miss, a Mrs, a sister and a Rev. When we had a family she became a Rev mother!”

The family grew, with the arrival of daughters Katriona and Zoe (now 16 and 13), and Leo Cheng’s career continued to progress. He acquired six medical degrees during the next few years, giving him further expertise in all that can go wrong in a person’s neck, mouth or face, as well as legal knowledge relating to medicine.

## Lucrative

As a dentist and specialist oral and maxillofacial surgeon, he could make a lucrative career in cosmetic surgery. However, Mr Cheng prefers work that repairs problems; these could be facial cancers, benign lumps or the result of accident or disease. Surgery to repair and reconstruct the

face is intensive – perhaps 10-16 hours.

But Mr Cheng gains enormous satisfaction from his work, especially when he sees the effects on the patient.

“I find surgery fascinating,” he says. “The work I do affects appearances, but also restores function and the ability to express our personality. We take our ability to make facial expressions for granted; injury or cancer takes all that away. It also causes loss of speech, chewing, swallowing, singing ... all these functions mean a lot to us and loss of them means a poor quality of life.”

You might think the Chengs had a busy enough life; Mr Cheng with his NHS work at St Bartholomew’s Hospital, and private practices in London and Cambridge, and Mrs Cheng with the demands of ministry in Histon, in the Cambridge circuit. But they have also fulfilled their desire to serve in mission together, as volunteers for Mercy Ships, the medical charity that offers free surgery and care to some of the poorest people on earth.

Visiting Liberia, the Chengs saw first-hand the damage caused by medical conditions that had been left untreated for years. The poorest people in countries like Liberia have no access to GP, dentist, midwife or pharmacy. For some people, their only hope of medical help is a charitable mission such as Mercy Ships.

“On the ‘Africa Mercy’, I operated on a whole range of conditions that we just don’t see in the west,” explains Mr Cheng. “For us, a benign tumour would be treated early,

but a lump in a poor society may have been left and left for 15 years, until we see it the size of a football. And if you have one of those at the side of your mouth you can’t breathe or eat properly. You might be in danger of choking every time you eat.

## Translates

“We repair many cleft lips, for children and adults; people are given the nickname which translates as ‘teeth in my face’. We repair the lip and take the teeth out of the cleft in the gums. The difference it makes to people’s lives is staggering. But I remember doing ward rounds on the ‘Africa Mercy’, with Dr Gary Packer. There was a woman patient, whose cleft lip and palate had been repaired, but she still would not look us in the eyes. I asked Gary, ‘Why is this lady not full of joy?’

“And Gary explained that this lady would realise gradually that her whole life had changed; she would go back to her village and realise that no one was throwing stones at her. She would go back to her family and they would take her out of the cow-shed and let her sleep in the house. She could use public transport and not be kicked off the bus. It might take her three years, but she would realise over time that she can now be a completely different person.”

Other patients, though, are quick to realise what has been done for them.

“Mercy Ships patients are all given a small wash-bag, which includes a little mirror,” explains Mr Cheng. “After

their operation I will often see them looking in the mirror. They will keep touching where the lump was, in amazement. Then when they leave the ship, they are dancing, waving handkerchiefs and praising the Lord down the gangway. You don’t see that in the NHS!”

Leo Cheng loves his work; his roles as a Christian and local preacher, as a dentist and as a surgeon come together to focus on what he sees as his mission in life:

“Every person is made in God’s image,” he says. “I have

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