**INSPIRE! Five Faculty Members, Their Research and One Piece of Advice for First Year Students**

**Professor Y.Y. Chen**

Prof. Liew: Good afternoon. We are talking to Professor Y.Y. Chen and his amazing research on migrants and health. Professor Chen, why don’t you tell us a little bit about your research, how you got interested in your area of research?

Prof. Chen: Sure, as you already mentioned, my research work sits at the intersection between health and international migration and a number of issues arise when these two fields of law happen to coincide. So one issue that I have been working on for the past few years has been on refugees and other migrants’ right to health care and to what extent they should they be included in our so-called universal health care system. And if they are included, should they be given the same kind of health care? Or should there be some kind of spectrum that we should be thinking about and where do we draw the line? So all that requires some thinking and also the reasoning behind it. Why are we drawing the line this way as opposed to another way? And so that is one issue I am currently working on.

In the past, I have worked on issues, something that is called medical tourism. So this is when people travel to somewhere let’s say Southeast Asia for example, and they actually pay for health care. The reason they would go there is because of wait times or cost issues. We see patients from the United States preferring to go abroad to receive health care. And then there is ethical and legal issues associated with that. So those are some of the issues that I’ve been tackling.

Prof Liew: That is super interesting. So can you tell us how you got interested in this are of the law and how you started your career in working on this issue?

Prof Chen: As an immigrant myself, I think a lot of issues that I work on has a personal touch. My parents when they first came to Canada, they struggled a bit in terms of finding appropriate service providers and so that was something, looking at that experience. Having, for quite a number of times, to have to translate for my mother for example and going to health care meetings with a health care provider, you know you just feel like there has got to be a better way to do things. And so that is what really peaked my interest.

My career started as a social worker, and through that process, that also allowed me to interact with patients who are either immigrants, refugees or people without any kind of legal status in Canada and how they access health care in Canada and some of the barriers that they face. In that context, we are looking at people who are also living with HIV right and so access to medication was a huge issue. And so that eventually led me to law school. I thought law school would be helpful for me to learn about what kind of policies are needed to put in place to make sure people can access health care. Here I am. It’s actually by draw of luck that after law school I started articling at the Canadian Civil Liberties Association and what do you know, the first file that I got to work on was the Nell Toussaint case. So at the time, Nell Toussaint was a person without legal status here in Canada and she was asking for the federal government for health care benefits and the government said no. And so the Canadian Civil Liberties Association was thinking about intervening in Toussaint’s legal challenge. I got the file and was told to look into this. We don’t know much about the Interim Federal Health Care program. Can you tell us what that is and al that? And ever since then, here I am. I’m still researching that topic.

Prof. Liew: That is so fascinating that you are working at the intersection of migration and health and that it is informed by your personal and professional career in a number of ways. So can you tell us a little bit about the challenges working in this area? What have you found to be challenging about researching in this area or perhaps what has been challenging about talking to people about their ideas about migration and health?

Prof. Chen: Well, I mean, working in this area, it’s often not easy. Sometimes, you know, I try to engage the public by, for example, publishing something in the popular press or sometimes you give interviews to the media. Initially, as someone very open to engaging with the public you will want to know what people’s reaction is but after awhile you learn not to look at the comments section, for example, because often times, you know, different things will be tossed at you, and it doesn’t show the best part of the people. So those are some of the things that are the hardest, working in this area. People often question why we’re even thinking about health care for these groups of people when Canadians are not receiving adequate health care, which is true. My mentality has always been that, you know, there is a way for us to work together such that everyone can be included and everyone can receive the kind of health care that we believe we deserve. And so, having to manage that kind of public reaction and have to explain to people and sometimes people are not clear in terms of all the refugee process and Canada’s responsibilities in taking in refugees, for example, you know what’s the difference between an irregular migrant and why we can’t call them an “illegal” migrant. All these things are very nuanced discussions and it requires patience to talk to people and sometimes you have to just grow a thicker skin when names are thrown at you or you are challenged really head on. I’ve been told to get back to China, right, even though that is not where I am from, but it is part of the work. Sometimes when you do see positive results from the work that you do, there is a sense of satisfaction.

Prof. Liew: Can you tell us more about that too? What has been the exciting part about working in this area and the research you are working on?

Prof. Chen: Obviously, something that is more recent, is the success of the Interim Federal Health challenge. The cut was brought in by the previous federal government in 2012 that literally gutted the program.

Prof. Liew: And this is the program that provides health care to refugees and refugee claimants?

Prof Chen: That’s right. Right. So a lot of refugees and refugee claimants, as a result of that cut, were left out of our health care system. There was well-documented negative effects on people’s health as well as to our health care system because now health care professionals were forced to deal with some of the administrative work and had to advocate on behalf of their patients and all that. And so it meant that everyone was affected. There was a group of doctors and lawyers that decided to work together in a fashion that I don’t think I’ve seen before. There was quite a bit of energy from both sides, and really wanting to mobilize on this issue and press against the government to say, look, this is not only against Canada’s long-committed principles on human rights but it is just literally inhumane at the very core of this issue. And so after quite a bit of hard work on both, outside of the court and within the legal system, first we got that legal success at the Federal Court and that so forces the then federal government to make some adjustments. And then we continued advocacy. The current federal government decided to reinstate the program to what it was prior to 2012 in 2016. And that to me was a success story. I played a very small part in this but the whole story is something that I find energetic. You can see that some of the effort I put in actually resulted in something that is a positive outcome for a lot of people. That is something that keeps you going for awhile.

Prof. Liew: That sounds great. That is a very inspiring story. Like you said, different groups of people who don’t typically work together or very often come together to work on a common cause. If you have one piece of advice for any first year student starting their career here at the University of Ottawa, what would you tell them?

Prof Chen: I would tell them what I said to my students who asked me that question before which is be collegial. Be supportive to your colleagues. As much as you think there are many lawyers in Canada, the legal community is actually quite small and a lot of times you live by your reputation. Right, if you have a great reputation, you’re going to lead a much more successful career down the road. And so, a lot of the people you are in class with ultimately are going to be your peers so start fostering that relationship early on, try to lean on each other and be respectful to each other. At the end of the day, you are all going to be colleagues and so if you take that mentality, I think that will improve the way that you approach law school, approach your interaction with your colleagues and your outlook in your career.

Prof. Liew: That’s great advice. I think that it is so true that from the beginning on day one you should act like a professional and act as if you are entering the legal profession. That’s great. Thank you Professor Chen. We’re grateful that you shared your time with us.