

The missionary doctor

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Dr. Kenneth Chang founded UC Irvine's H.H. Chao Comprehensive Digestive Disease Center, one of the few clinics in the country to provide a full spectrum of care specifically for digestive disorders. Photo: Paul R. Kennedy

(PhysOrg.com) -- Dr. Kenneth Chang has built one of the nation's finest digestive disease centers for UC Irvine Healthcare with a drive and passion inspired by doctors he assisted in a poor Taiwanese fishing village nearly 30 years ago.

Then a medical student, Chang had taken a year off from his studies at Brown University to work in a missionary clinic. With very little equipment, the doctors there often improvised, using unconventional methods that defied Chang's formal medical training.

"They would have to rig up a lot of stuff, like reusing IV tubing and creating needles out of fishhooks," he recalls. "That year changed my

whole perspective. Their thinking was: 'If we don't have it, let's make it.' Those doctors were my heroes. I thought, "This is what I want to do."

Chang, who came to UCI as a gastrointestinal medicine fellow in 1987 and joined the faculty of the Division of [Gastroenterology](#) in 1991, has maintained that can-do spirit. Now chief of gastroenterology, he pioneered novel uses of endoscopic ultrasound and helped establish clinical centers at UCI that focus on patients and buck the traditional academic hospital structure..

In 1993, despite having no background in cancer care, Chang was asked to take over the gastrointestinal oncology division of the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center, now thriving. A decade later, with a \$2 million National Institutes of Health grant, he founded the H.H. Chao Comprehensive [Digestive Disease](#) Center, which serves as many as 20,000 patients a year and is among only a few facilities in the country to provide a full spectrum of care specifically for disorders of the esophagus, stomach, liver, pancreas, colon and rectum.

"These centers are really the way of the future for healthcare — being disease-oriented instead of department-oriented," says Chang, executive director.

It's a far cry from practicing field medicine in a remote part of the world, but he continues to be inspired by his experiences as a young missionary.

"My first love, my first passion, is still — thinking back to that little hospital in Taiwan — the patient," Chang says. "Everything is driven by my commitment to helping people at the end of their rope, when something has to be done. That sparks the innovation, the desire to provide good service and have an efficient, comprehensive approach."

Provided by UC Irvine

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