

ONLINE ageless

...it's just a number



Tan Lee Tuan has changed the way we look at the usual walking stick and has put all kinds of features including an MP3 music player and built-in radio!

The walking stick or cane has a long history – from being used as a fashion accessory and the occasional weapon to a mobility aid. How times have changed as today, these sticks are a far-cry from the early ones that were made from wood. They have evolved into ones with many more features and the man leading this charge is Tan Lee Tuan, founder and CEO of social enterprise, Agegracefully.

“We’ve put a lot of thought into our design. Besides it being senior-friendly, we also care about the aesthetics. All our walking sticks can stand on their own and come with a detachable safety wrist cord,” he shared.

Types

His company has six models namely: Stickplus, Foldplus, Chairplus (seat cane), CarbonBond (smart umbrella), Small CarbonQuad and Medium CarbonQuad. They are also complemented with three different choice of handles such as ergonomic, essential (which comes with a touch-light and manual alarm), and MP3 music player and built-in radio (which also comes with a touch-light and an auto fall alarm).

For instance, the CarbonBond cleverly disguises as an umbrella. Lee Tuan said, “This model tackles a common resistance amongst seniors who are stigmatised when using a walking stick.” The walking stick is attached seamlessly to the umbrella. It can be detached and used separately while using the umbrella at the same time. Also, with this model, the user can download let’s say nursery rhymes to encourage interaction with his or her grandchildren, or even download their favourite songs so he or she can enjoy them with his or her buddies in a park. Yes, this is totally reminiscent of the spy gadgetry employed in James Bond movies.

Then there is the compact Foldplus, which is ideal for active seniors who need their occasional support while pursuing their outdoor interest. The tubing in this cane is carbon-fibre making it strong and lightweight (the other canes are made of aluminium alloy). Said Lee Tuan, “It is the first foldable cane in the world with an interchangeable base design with the capability of switching it into a more stable quad base when required. Constructed with a folding slider joint for extra strength to ensure the integrity of its sectional structure. The elastic cord design also enables an easy auto lock-in when released.”

All these bells and whistles are completely intentional. The auto fall alarm feature is activated when a user falls, attracting attention. He explained further, “When experiencing a fall, the user could be suffering from a state of shock and may have difficulty projecting his or her voice. This alarm will help to project his or her voice better and get help from a passerby.”

Also, the bases of the walking sticks are interchangeable; the base comes in different sizes and addresses the user’s different needs. For example, if your physiotherapist tells you that you need a walking stick with a bigger base to provide steadier support because of a hip injury, you can simply replace the base with a larger one without having to get a new walking stick. A few months down the road, when you have recovered from your injury, you can change the base of your walking stick back to a smaller one, explained Lee Tuan.





He added that these walking sticks have been in the making for six years. “There are many innovations in walking sticks over the years internationally and we are not the first to have incorporated things like lights on them. Most of the past innovations focused on the electronic features while we focus on the overall user experience. We sent a lot of different walking sticks to the rehab hospital for feedback in the early stages of our product development and through the feedback, we refined and modified our collection.”

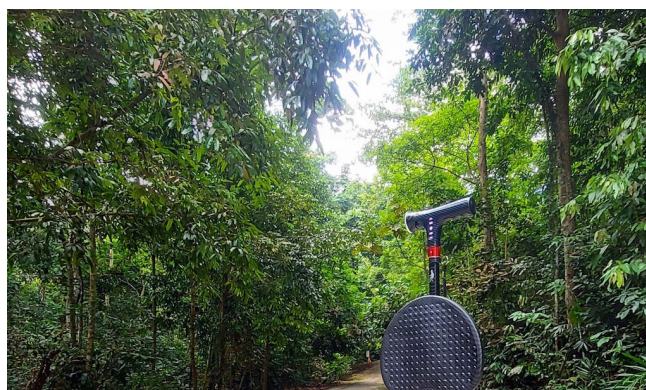
He seems to be going down the right path with these smart sticks. His sticks have received local and international awards including the Eldercare Innovation Award, Singapore Good Design Award, German Design Award and Ageing Asia Startup of the Year Award.

Stigma

However as these canes have evolved so has the stigma of having one. In the early days it was stylish walking around with a cane but, sadly today, walking around with one may carry an unwanted stigma for the user. Lee Tuan shared that many seniors don't want to be perceived to be “incapable” when seen using a cane, and this may result in them being marginalised. To overcome this, he suggests that family members should consult their family doctor and get him or her to convince their loved ones on the benefits of having a cane.

Once convinced, the user can then choose the right one for him or her. Lee Tuan weighed in on this: “For users who are already using a walking aid, they can choose a model that is similar to the existing device to start with. We can also consult with the users about their preferences. For a user who is discharged from the hospital and needs a walking aid to improve his or her transitional experience, he or she can consider our CarbonQuad as it comes with a quad base and an anti-slip self-standing tip. They can interchange the base according to the condition accordingly.”

He added: “For user who has never used a walking aid and is afraid of the stigma of using one, our CarbonBond is the preferred option as it is common to be carrying an umbrella in Singapore. For user who is planning to travel can consider our Foldplus (fold cane) and Chairplus.”





More than 14,000 seniors have benefitted from these walking sticks. Lee Tuan shared one of his clients, Mr Su who bought a stick for his father, who required some form of walking support. The son said that, "We would always have to remind him to take his last two sticks out, but for this one, he more or less always remembers to take it around with him." He has even added that his dad enjoys the radio and MP3 music player that comes with the model. He also noted that the stick is less bulky and stands by itself, so his 86-year-old father need not constantly find a place to rest it.

Lee Tuan added that they will continue to refine and improve their existing range for now with whatever resources they have, and may explore other products.