

# The Long and Winding Road

By Dr Oh Jen Jen

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One of the commonest reactions when people hear you are a doctor is the exclamation "Wow!" together with a look of utter reverence. Some of us choose to savour the moment. I, on the other hand, prefer to wave it off and clear all misconceptions.

Of course, it is perfectly natural to be admired for being a physician. It remains a highly regarded profession here, with thousands of college students competing with each other to enter the NUS Faculty of Medicine every year. What then follows is 5 gruelling years of hard work, long hours, and a large financial investment, in our quest to graduate.

Once we start work, however, the picture becomes so much clearer – that our idealistic view of an easier life after medical school could not be further from the truth, that the true test of our abilities is only beginning, and that the road ahead is long.

The start of a fresh new physician's life begins with the first day in the ward. The initial euphoria from being addressed as "Doctor" quickly dissipates

after the first 10 minutes as nurses page you constantly for changes. You go without food for the entire day as you struggle with intravenous plugs, blue letters and discharges. By the time you join the evening round, your hair is dishevelled, your skin sticky with sweat, your shirt halfway out of your pants, your tie left in a room somewhere, and your stethoscope hanging precariously from one ear.

"The First Night Call" is the next most challenging rite of passage. Unfortunately for some, this falls within the same timeframe as "The Disastrous First Day". Night duties here can vary, depending on which hospital and department you are in, but they are notoriously strenuous, and certain house officers have resigned as a result of "The Worst Night Of Their Lives".

Does anyone recall dozing off at the wheel or nearly getting a needle-stick injury after a bad night? My own bad experience involved a bout of food poisoning after eating a plate of bad ham from the hospital pantry during a Christmas Eve call. On another occasion, I had a spiking fever for 2 weeks after contracting tonsillitis from a paediatric patient, and did ward rounds wrapped in a sweater, popping paracetamol every 6 hours with little effect, until I finally ended up a patient myself with an admission temperature of 41.5 degrees Celsius.

After housemanship, life as a medical officer is a small improvement. But this also includes a whole new set of hurdles to overcome. Procedures increase in number, contact with patients and their families involves a greater element of accountability, and controlling one's temperament can be near impossible at times. I was once shoved against a wall by a collapsed patient's hysterical daughter, as her father stood by and screamed at me. On another occasion, an angry female patient hurled obscenities at a roomful of

doctors and nurses after being told she had to wait a few minutes for a specialist review.

Most doctors I know tell me they will never encourage their children to join medicine. When I completed my 'A' Levels and worked in a government hospital for a few months, the doctors there also tried to talk me out of it, which obviously had no effect!

But if you ask me whether I have any regrets about becoming a physician, the answer will be a resounding "No". All of us may have different reasons for joining medicine, but I'd like to believe that every doctor starts off with the best of intentions, and that most still retain the basic desire to help mankind and ease suffering. Numerous overseas humanitarian aid efforts organized by local doctors offer the best proof of such altruism.

Medicine, like all other professions in the world, has its ups and downs. There will be days where you'll feel dejected over making a mistake or losing a patient. But there will also be others where the elation from saving someone's life erases all the frustrations of the past few days, weeks or even months.

Most importantly, however, never take for granted the wonderful opportunities we have – from performing state-of-the-art operations and attending international conferences, to something as simple as just being allowed to participate in the everyday drama of a patient's life. Nothing quite compares to the experience of having a human life completely entrusted to you. In fact, I'm certain nothing ever will.

Recently, yet another batch of medical students graduated, while our house officers took the Hippocratic Oath. I hope you will find these words of encouragement useful, and never lose sight of the true essence of being a doctor, no matter how difficult the circumstance. ■



Dr Oh at her graduation ceremony.

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