

ADAPTING & PUSHING FORWARD

At the beginning of each school year, the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom (SMSUK) organises a series of events to help our varied members. Below are some of the highlights.

To ease the transition from being medical students to house officers (HO), we organise an annual “Surviving Your First On Call” workshop, which took place virtually this year due to the pandemic. We are grateful to Dr Kiki Teo (senior resident, cardiology, National Heart Centre Singapore) and her three colleagues, Drs Ron Ng, Xiu Hue Lee and Yew Jielin, for retaining a high level of teaching for our participants despite limitations. Over 20 medical students took part in eight clinical simulation scenarios guided by the aforementioned tutors.

Our largest networking event – the Freshers, Members and Alumni (FMA) gathering – serves as a great platform for our members to forge inter-cohort bonds as well as attend talks and panel discussions on topics pertinent to career development. This year, we combined FMA, our Pre-Departure Talk and Dental Dinner into one large-scale Zoom event. Using breakout rooms, our 80 participants were able to catch up with friends and meet fresh faces through sessions akin to “speed dating” formats. Freshers (new

incoming students), medical students and dental students were then separated to attend talks catered to their level and course of study. We would like to specially thank Dr Grace Tan (consultant, The Surgical Oncology Clinic, Farrer Park Hospital), Mr Jeffrey Lim (consultant, Great Western Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust), Dr Paul Tern (resident, Singapore General Hospital), Dr Bryan Chong (HO, Ng Teng Fong General Hospital) and Dr Seraphina Rong (foundation year 1, West London NHS Trust) for volunteering their time to be panellists for our discussion on the similarities and differences of working and living in Singapore and the UK.

Our Med(UK)ated Orientation Camp is undoubtedly one of our most highly-anticipated events. We were heartened that many freshers signed up for our virtual orientation, eager to build new friendships as they start out in a new school amid this difficult time. Spurred by the dedication and enthusiasm of the planning committee and orientation group leaders, the freshers quickly warmed up to each other and were soon giving their all in the games, competing to be crowned overall champion. SMSUK warmly welcomes our freshers and looks forward to supporting them in their future studies and careers.



An orientation group reconnecting during our SMSUK Goes Hiking event!



Exploring Solomon's Temple in the Peak District, UK

SMSUK also holds an annual wider UK trip where we toured Edinburgh and the Peak District as a society in previous years. This year, due to restrictions on gathering sizes in the UK and members studying remotely from Singapore, we were unable to meet up for our usual big society trip. Instead, the planning committee gave our members the freedom to decide on a hiking spot to explore within groups of six, in adherence with governmental guidelines on the safe distancing measures. Tapping on Instagram’s “Story” function, hikers were able to see what other groups from the UK and Singapore were doing in real-time and also complete an online bingo challenge. In a time where social interaction is greatly reduced, this was a precious opportunity to trade our computer screens for the great outdoors and meet up with our SMSUK friends!

We feature in this month’s column Dai Lin’s entry where she shares about how she has been coping with the changes in the learning arrangements.

- Tan Ying Hui, Editor, SMSUK



Orientation group “X-ray” with their plasticine models representing their group!



Text by Goh Dai Lin



Dai Lin is a Year 1 medical student at Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry.

The first thing that came to my mind when I read this month's prompt was Robert Frost's famous remarks in a 1954 interview: "In three words, I can sum up everything I've learnt about life. It goes on."

Sixty-six years later, Frost's wise words offer some hope against the dismal backdrop of COVID-19. The pandemic has changed the ways we study, work and live. For students, it is a double-edged sword: lessons can be attended from the comfort of our cosy rooms, which also meant that there needs to be more self-discipline. For example, I have to try doubly hard to stay focused during the 9 pm physiology sessions while my family laughed to the latest Netflix film in the living room.

Yes, there's no mistake – it is a 9 pm and not 9 am lesson, because of the gaping difference in time zones. Fortunately, night sessions only occur twice a week – live anatomy and physiology lessons take place at 9 pm every Monday and weekly round-up sessions at 11 pm every Friday. Other sessions like problem-based learning (a session for students to work together on a case study related to the topic of the week) and clinical skills training are scheduled at reasonable hours in the afternoon. Personally, I also really like that our lectures are pre-recorded and thus can be watched anytime, anywhere. Many of my friends who are in the UK had to turn up for their lessons in person, despite the virus spreading like wildfire. I am lucky to be able to access my teaching resources without putting myself at risk.

One very unique experience about learning online would be the group sessions held over Microsoft Teams. At first, it was challenging to adjust to the new arrangement. Students and tutors talked over each other because it was difficult to signpost when one

wanted to speak. Occasionally, there were lapses in communication because someone's microphone would go bust and another's Internet connection would give out (both had happened to me before so you can imagine how embarrassed I was).

Fortunately, time worked its magic. Soon enough, our interactions became less awkward and we became more comfortable around each other. I attribute this to one main factor: kindness. For example, when two people started talking at the same time, one party would kindly remark, "Please, go ahead", and when we concluded each session, we would check in with one another to find out how we are doing in different parts of the world. Simple gestures like these allow people to feel connected even though we are miles apart.

It's been six weeks since school started and looking back, I confess that it was not a smooth-sailing journey. Initially, I found it very difficult to cope. It was easy to lose concentration when we studied in our rooms with distractions abound. To counter this, I tried various methods to enforce self-discipline, including putting my phone outside the room and limiting my daily screen time. Despite these measures, I realised that my mind still craved some form of escape from the overwhelming learning materials. And as I was also sleeping later due to night lessons, my concentration span shortened. The only thing that kept me going was adrenaline which, as several studies have proven, was utterly unsustainable for the long run.

To overcome this, I changed the way I studied. I used to study for long hours each day, taking breaks only for meals and sleep. For a change, I identified the hours I was productive and made sure to dedicate immense focus to my work

during that time. I stopped reproaching myself when my brain reached its saturation point and took it as a sign to rest instead.

During my downtime, I engage in physical activities like exercising, learning new dance choreography or simply doing housework. After a few weeks of this, I saw the positive impact it had on me. I became more reinvigorated, focused and driven to get to work.

However, there were also days when I could not get my act together, no matter how hard I tried. I caught myself entrenched in a cycle of negative thoughts: if the pandemic worsens, does that mean I will never get to go back to the UK? Why am I not able to understand this topic while everyone else does? If I'm back in the UK, will my friends in Singapore still remember me?

On days like these, I remind myself that I cannot solve these issues on my own. Reaching out to friends and family helps a lot because they are always forthcoming with reassurance, honest feedback and advice. They are the blessings I always remember to count when I am down. Reminding myself of all the things I am grateful for helps to put me back on my feet.

To sum up, this academic term has been a roller coaster ride. The pandemic has upended the life I knew and opened my eyes to many new experiences. From an evolutionary perspective, this unexpected conundrum we find ourselves in is a big test – and probably the biggest of the century – of our fitness to adapt and cope. Hence, I want to encourage my peers to never give up because obstacles like these teach us what strength is. As Frost said at the end of his interview: "But life – it goes on. It always has. It always will. Don't forget that." ♦