

TWO YEARS into Medical School

PART 1

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Parallel histories

When I was a child, my mother loved to tell me stories from her university days. She said those were the most radiant years of her life, ones she enjoyed to the fullest. There was the thrill of unbridled youth, coupled with the freedom of academic enterprise. With independence came the liberty to allocate and repurpose time, pre-curated school days a relic of the past. University was the semi-autonomous rite of passage to adulthood, with only a portion of its responsibilities. It was the place where you discovered and found yourself.

As a university student, my mother weaved through the campus on her steel-framed bicycle, squeaky wheels and wooden box laden with books at its rear. Swerving around the tree-lined bends, the lake next to the Central Library glimmered, its lotus pads dark circles under the relentless sun. During examination season, my mother's study group took turns to save seats for each other in the library, where students camped out overnight between shelves of books, brushing their teeth by the sinks in the mornings. On lazier afternoons, she leafed through pages of jotted notes lying on her dormitory bed, the ceiling fan overhead whirling. When the scent of freshly made desserts wafted up from a floor below, she was always one of the first in line at the canteen. With her roommates, she raced towards what would later become one of her fondest and most vivid memories of youth, strangely yet gently beckoning.

By the time I entered university, it was a different campus, a different dream. Instead of a bike, the orange and blue university shuttle buses ferried me

from Kent Ridge MRT to UTown. In place of the library, I studied at the common area outside Starbucks, the vast patch of green in front of me, the view and weather sublime on wind-rimmed days. While my mother ran for desserts, I ran from the anatomy hall to the histology laboratory, and for the MD6 tutorial rooms when my clinical group detoured too far away for lunch. On that day, we lost track of time in between full-bellied laughter and honest conversation, enclosed in the warm-coloured walls of La Nonna.

Getting into medical school

When my juniors asked me for advice on applying to medical school – questions on how to write their personal statements and prepare for interviews – I thought hard about what I could share. It prompted me to consider what made for a successful medical school candidate, and by extension, what my friends in NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine are like. I thought about their personalities and attributes, lingering on unifying features that made them alike. Nevertheless, there was nothing definitive I could arrive on.

Besides the usual character traits of integrity, diligence and persistence, along with a prevailing code of moral conduct, there are few other qualities that can encapsulate or represent our class. Everyone has idiosyncrasies of his or her own, and it is impossible to pinpoint why each of us made the cut for medical school.

Similarly, the interests and pursuits of medical students range far and wide. Among my classmates, there are national players representing



Singapore at the Southeast Asian Games, impassioned environmentalists driving sustainable efforts and aspiring artists producing Spotify soundtracks. There are friends living in Hall whose gamut of co-curricular activities all but take them away from the studying of medicine, friends who strike a good balance between work and play, and friends who swear by the hardcover *Robbins Basic Pathology* textbook they lug to school every day. We have our class clowns and opinionated vocalists, gym jockeys and food bloggers, diehard nerds and old soul poets... Though few might expect it, medical school is variety and diversity – there is a place for everyone.

Another truth I discerned in retrospect: most of us made it into medical school because we were *lucky*. We were lucky to have performed well at the multiple mini-interview stations and encountered faculty who believed we would make for good doctors. We were privileged to have come from educationally advantaged backgrounds and systems that gave us the circumstances to succeed. We had teachers who impressed upon us the value of hard work, developed our ability to think for ourselves and invoked our curiosity for the subjects we learnt. We met seniors who served as our role models, demonstrating, by virtue of who



they were, what compassion and humility looked like, and what responsibility and an unwavering work ethic meant.

Then, there were those who went the extra mile for us. I am indelibly grateful to my General Paper teacher, who sacrificed her lunch breaks on Fridays to discuss extra essay plans with me, and Mum, who made sure I always had hot piping food on the dinner table to return home to. These people supported us in tangible and intangible ways, believing in us when we struggled or lost faith in ourselves. While we were zealous and ambitious, we were more so enabled and blessed.

In replying my juniors, I urged them to be themselves, relax and, most of all, enjoy and learn from the process of applying to medical school. Medicine, after all, is a science and an art. In many instances, it is also serendipity.

Pre-clinical years

The first year of medical school was a flourish of new beginnings, friendships and experiences. Like flowers, each was a bloom inching and spreading open, with some shutting earlier, and others maturing to full-laden density.

In medical school, we had an intense curriculum. Our first few weeks of school already had our calendars brimming, packed with back-to-back lectures, tutorials, anatomy hall and histology laboratory sessions. During the lecture breaks, my friends and I would wind up at Dilys by the bread racks, enamoured by the scent of coffee and assorted

buns, full and eased into perfect domes. On occasions, there would even be the fragrance of turmeric, the auntie behind the counter folding potato filling into pastry dough, crimping the edges together deftly to form the braided rims of curry puffs.

As first years, there was a lot to adjust to and take in. We studied anatomy, physiology, histology and biochemistry with vigour and exuberance. All of a sudden, we were medical students, doctors to be, and the idea was surreal. As much as the newfound knowledge was overwhelming, our freshness and eagerness kept us going. Only later in the year did we run into each other streaming lectures from the library, exchanging knowing glances as we hid rueful smiles.

By second year, we had formed our close circles of friends and acquired a clearer idea of what we hoped to achieve in our pre-clinical years. Things became more comfortable and manageable, as we gained familiarity over the various aspects of medical school. Second year was a continuation of the first year's endeavours, our days filled by the usual array of lectures and tutorials. What was different was the new *mala* stall at Frontier canteen, that made our noses run when we felt brave enough for another notch up the spice-tolerance scale.

Academics wise, the curriculum was heavier, but counterintuitively, everything made more sense. Perhaps this was because the Year 2 curriculum was built upon our Year 1 foundation: pathology was derived from anatomy and physiology, while pharmacology acted upon the body's physiological

mechanisms. Our greater overall breadth and depth of knowledge helped us to draw connections between concepts, allowing us to keep the bigger picture in mind instead of getting caught up in the details. The year passed in quick footsteps, steady hearts and opened books in libraries.

The medical school experience

Unlike other faculties, medicine is relatively self-contained due to the way our degree is structured and organised. We have our own campus, academic calendar and curriculum, in addition to a curated set of electives and exchange programmes.

Instead of a modular system, we have a fixed syllabus whereby everyone goes through the same series of lectures and tutorials. Although I was initially disappointed by the inability to choose or customise classes, I gradually grew to appreciate the routine and predictability medical school offered. It was a relief that I did not have to arrange my own timetable or strategise over how to bid for modules. More importantly, a common curriculum strengthened our solidarity by giving us a shared experience and memories we could all relate to. It felt reassuring to go through medical school in tandem with the rest of my batchmates, as we learnt, revised and took our examinations together.

Despite the standardised curriculum, there is no lack of options or opportunities for co-curricular activities in medical school. We have our annual Rag and Flag (RAG), Inter-Faculty Games, as well as local and overseas community involvement



Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine A member of the NUS



projects (LCIPs and OCIPs) to participate in. We also have organising committees for events like Freshmen Orientation Programme and Dinner and Dance, apart from Medical Society directorates, ad-hoc book clubs and interest groups.

As an incoming freshman, the plethora of experiences presented by university can be overwhelming. This gives rise to FOMO – the fear of missing out. At the start of orientation, these exclamations were familiar: “I’m FOMO I’m not in dance for RAG”, “I’m FOMO because I can’t make it for the house gathering tonight”, and “I’m FOMO about not signing up for OCIPs”. I think back to walking around the multi-purpose hall during CommServ, a day where community service projects convene to put up an exhibition for incoming juniors, and being inundated by the sheer spectrum and number of projects spanning the room. When everything seems possible, paralysis in decision-making occurs.

Personally, there was also the impulse to take hold of these offerings. After considering which causes most resonated with me, I joined Project Lokun, a biannual humanitarian health service project to Pursat, Cambodia, and the Neighbourhood Health Service, a local health screening project reaching out to elderly residents in rental blocks. Beyond medicine, I continued dancing in NUS Synergy and the PULSE scholars’

programme under Frontier Danceland. I choreographed as well for the first time in medical school, putting together a piece for the Silent Mentor Appreciation Ceremony.

My time in the community service projects that I was a part of left a deep impression on me. My fondest recollections are of the people – the residents and villagers I served, together with the friends I worked alongside with. Sometimes, it is the most mundane and minute of details you remember: how dim the corridor of the rental block was as it extended down into more sets of metal-hinged gates... the throb of the granny’s pulse as you measured her blood pressure. I recall staying up till the wee hours of the morning sorting through health records on Excel and those long van rides in Cambodia from Phnom Penh to deep inside the villages. When I dozed off on my friends’ shoulders, I remember waking up to the most comical expressions of them sleeping.

Through these experiences, I gained insight into my strengths, weaknesses and dispositions. When there were difficult decisions to make, I also realised what I loved and cherished. It takes time to sort through all the shimmer and the clutter, to figure out and understand yourself. Growth is never a linear process – it is important to be patient. ♦

Legend

1. Being inducted into the medical fraternity at the White Coat Ceremony
2. Celebrating our birthdays for one another and being each others’ pillars of support in medical school
3. Day trip to Johor Bahru with my M2 clinical group, where we tried out the amazing banana cakes from Hiap Joo bakery
4. Striking a pose in front of one of Angkor Wat’s temples, which we visited for our L25 trip
5. Colour coordinated with my M1 clinical group in our Patient-Based Programme attires, each of us in a different shade of the rainbow

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