



The EDITOR'S MUSINGS

Dr Tina Tan

Editor

A year ago, I wrote on the psychological fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic on doctors and healthcare workers in the May 2020 issue of *SMA News* (<https://bit.ly/5205Opinion2>). My thoughts and emotions then revolved around how frantic things seemed, and how quickly everyone had to respond to an ever-evolving and unknown situation. It was truly a constant state of "heightened alert".

One year on, things have changed, so to speak. Singapore has vaccinated an astonishing 80% and counting of our population, and we have managed to keep our COVID-19 mortality rates low. Except now, we face pandemic fatigue – a sense of exhaustion, frustration and growing confusion. The restrictions and constant changes in directives have taken their toll in a devastatingly pervasive manner. The Hobbit's blog post on 27 September 2021 (<https://bit.ly/3CWTa5h>) sums it up best: "So very, very sick of it". And even then, the Hobbit was quoting another doctor whose words echo ground sentiments.

I do not blame anyone for the way I or others feel, though it is easy to point fingers and make certain parties the scapegoat.

When the dust settles, we will continue to pay the price, unfortunately. Ongoing surveys show that Singaporeans are increasingly stressed and burned out,^{1,2} and studies looking specifically at doctors show the same.³ The Samaritans of Singapore reported a jump in suicide cases in 2020, the highest in several years.⁴ I do not look forward to seeing this year's numbers.

This issue focuses on mental health which has too often been relegated as intangible. We do not feel the difference when our mental

well-being is gradually eroded, but it comes back to bite us when we are not careful or mindful about looking after ourselves. As such, we've featured snippets from doctors who contemplated quitting medicine amid these difficult times. I would hasten not to judge, but to applaud their honesty, and to remember that this is just the tip of the iceberg. Dr Chris Tan Ze Jia pens a piece addressing the mental health of doctors, and A/Prof Cuthbert Teo shares the personal cost of not being able to travel during these times.

I am also pleased to announce the addition of medical students Joycelyn Soo and Helen Cai as part of our Editorial Board. They have been given the unofficial positions of student correspondents and have conducted an interview with Prof Chong Yap Seng on the mental health of NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine's faculty and students over the past two years.

I also wish to highlight the published results of an SMA survey on the psychological impact that rostered routine testing (RRT) has had on healthcare workers. RRT has its value, but what is its continued value and sustainability when we are trying to live with an endemic infectious disease?

Amid the doom and gloom, the only way is forward. We must get through this. What options do we have? We must emerge changed for the better despite the difficult circumstances. What that change is would certainly differ individually. To paraphrase the Hobbit, we certainly do not want to be like shuffling undead zombies, stuck in perpetuity. Adversity will not allow us to remain where we are.

Dr Tan is a psychiatrist with the Better Life Psychological Medicine Clinic, and a visiting consultant at the Institute of Mental Health. She is also an alumnus of Duke-NUS Medical School. Between work and family life, she squeezes time out for her favourite pastimes – reading a good (fiction) book and writing.

Speaking of Hobbit, in her post on 4 October 2021 clarifying an error made by the Straits Times, she made reference to her first blog post from 2011. In this ten-year-old post, it was implied that the Editorial Board practises "censorship". I would like to emphasise that as a publication, the SMA News is for doctors. Hence, we have a responsibility to our readership and articles submitted by authors are subject to review, and subsequent acceptance or rejection. We take pride in our review process, and in producing monthly issues which would be beneficial to our readers. This publication process does not equate to censorship, by far, and we certainly continue to welcome ideas and articles from fellow doctors for consideration. ♦

References

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4. Ng KG. *452 suicides reported in Singapore in 2020 amid Covid-19, highest since 2012.* *The Straits Times* [Internet]. 8 July 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3yl276q>.