

When I was the Patient...

Being a doctor is a calling, as many would say, to care, treat and comfort those in need. However, doctors too are humans and there may come a time in life when doctors themselves need some medical attention.

Here, two doctors share their experiences as a patient and how being a doctor had an impact on their respective encounters.



Text by Dr X

It was an uncanny experience looking at my own heart in motion on the fluoroscopy monitor as I underwent an emergency angioplasty for an acute coronary event. In that situation, prior medical knowledge of what to expect throughout the procedure certainly helped.

Looking at my own cardiac movement and continuous electrocardiogram, I could estimate that I had several seconds to say a desperate prayer before losing consciousness, and also to

harmonise my soul with the Divine should I not regain earthly awareness.

I also understood without questioning the rationale for the attending radiologist's instruction for me to cough as hard as possible when he gave the order (which thankfully proved unnecessary). I suppose the pre-emptive action was meant for the event of ventricular fibrillation – to hopefully abort it without the attending staff having to thump my chest or start cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

On the flip side, the preventent knowledge was not helpful when I saw a cardiothoracic surgeon colleague of mine peeping into the fluoroscopy suite while I was undergoing angioplasty. I knew in an instant that he was called to be on standby for emergency open-heart surgery should complications arise. (*I would not have chosen that surgeon to perform it if I had a choice.*) Thankfully, the angioplasty went smoothly and here I am, able to pen this short reflection today.

Text by Dr Chie Zhi Ying, Editorial Board Member

As a clinician, regardless of where and what you may be practising, you are always the one being consulted by patients. It is a great privilege as well as a humbling experience to be sitting in the consultation chair, listening to the woes of patients and trying your best to help them. And when the occasion arises where a doctor, like any fellow human being, falls ill and becomes a patient, the role is reversed and it becomes quite an interesting encounter.

I recall one such morning when I was busy seeing patients in my consultation room. I had felt a little unwell the night before but decided to work anyway. As the morning wore on, I felt chills and rigour with a stuffy nose and terrible body aches. It came to a point where I felt as if I was in the freezing cold Arctic, feeling goosebumps and chills all over; I stood up and switched my room's air conditioner off. The very next patient came in and as I went through her laboratory results for her chronic conditions, she casually remarked, "Doctor, how come your room so hot and stuffy? Never on air con, is it?"

I gave her a sheepish and apologetic look, inched painfully

towards the air conditioning panel on the other side of the room and switched it on reluctantly. After the consultation, I took my own temperature and realised I was having a high fever. I decided that it was high time to see my colleague for my self-diagnosed viral upper respiratory tract infection.

The first obvious benefit of seeing your colleague, especially one working at the same institution, is convenience. I simply called up a senior colleague before I popped over to his room on the other side of the level for a quick consultation.

The second good thing about seeing a fellow colleague is the familiarity and trust already present. As the doctor that fellow colleagues often turn to for advice on handling patients' issues, this senior colleague of mine was naturally the person of choice when it came to seeking a physician.

After confirming my earlier self-diagnosis, I was prescribed medicine and quickly packed off to rest. Being as unwell as I was, I was grateful for an efficient consultation and of course, some tender loving care and advice from my colleague. Hearing comforting words and getting gentle care from one's

doctor can really make your day, reminding me to always be a caring doctor to all my patients.

On the other end of the spectrum, I can imagine doctors feeling hesitant to see another doctor if the consultation pertains to sensitive issues (ie, psychological issues, gender-based medical problems). After all, it is human nature to fear embarrassment and stigmatisation. However, at the end of the day, we doctors are also humans. Being in the patient role is a stark reminder of our own vulnerability as a human being but more importantly, our responsibility to the greater humanity as physicians. ♦

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