

Laughter, the Best Medicine



Text by Melanie Chee
Photo by Nicholas Lim

The beginning of 2024 was a busy time for the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom (SMSUK). In January, we had our social event in Birmingham, held jointly with the Hong Kong Medical Society of the United Kingdom (HKMSUK). It was a great afternoon of catching up with old friends and making new ones over lunch. The location was also a welcome change from our usual London events – especially for those of us who study in the Midlands!

In early February, our members travelled even further out to Porto, Portugal for our highly popular annual weekend trip (tickets sold out in just nine minutes!). The change in scenery was a much-needed break from our books and hospital placements. Many memories were made as we explored the charming cobblestone streets and winding uphill alleyways. And of course, as typical Singaporeans, we just had to try as many bakeries as we could in

a bid to find Porto's best *pastel de nata* (Portuguese egg tart).

Finally, we had our Annual Conference – a very different flavour of event, but still extremely well received. It was a full day of engaging speakers and hands-on workshops, held in collaboration with the Malaysian Medics International United Kingdom. Aimed at exploring the increasingly diverse and unique opportunities in medicine and dentistry, this year's conference theme was "Routes: Beyond Medical Horizons". It was a source of much inspiration, especially as many of us students are beginning to contemplate where we want our future career paths to lead us.

By the time this letter reaches you, it would be April. The 29th SMSUK committee's term will have ended, and we will have passed the torch on to the next committee. Time truly flies when you are having fun (and keeping very,

very busy!). As homage to the many moments of laughter and fellowship our little Singaporean community has had this year many kilometres away from Singapore – and aptly too, this being the month of April Fools' – Shayna shares in this letter how humour has kept her sane in medical school.

Melanie is a Year 4 medical student at the University of Leicester and is Editor on the 29th executive committee of SMSUK.



January's social event held in Birmingham with the HKMSUK

Text by Shayna Walia

Moving to a different country has been really tough in various ways. When challenges arise, coping strategies differ far and wide. Sometimes when the going gets tough, the tough should just live, laugh and love. Personally, I have found humour to be my best-wielded weapon.

I remember when I first stepped into my friend's flat after a long and hard day of lectures, seminars and an anatomical dissection. I swung the door open as far as the broken fire door in the student accommodations would allow, shuffled my way into the narrow doorway and then heard a click and the sound of plastic hitting the floor. And the fire alarm set off. I had somehow managed to set it off by bumping into it with my backpack. Normally, this would have been my thirteenth reason (referencing the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*), the final straw. Instead, I burst out laughing, because that was the funniest thing that had happened to me that week. I was still laughing about it at the pub that day with my friend who, oddly enough, took it as well as I did. Thank you to my friend for bearing the brunt of some colourful language from the building's occupants.

Coping with humour

As a medic, you start to develop a sense of humour to cope with the stresses of life. Being in my first year, my humour often comes from my mentors. Our tutorial group was discussing professionalism in the workplace, in the context of humour in a doctor-patient interaction. The gist of the lesson was to have social awareness, to err on the side of caution, and to keep quiet if we were curiously inept at reading the room. After all, which patient would want a GP who laughs off their mental health symptoms, right?

My humour is also well influenced by my learning in the field. Professionalism aside, I find that humour is one of three main ways medics can cope with the stresses of our experiences and the impending (notorious) National Health Service pay. The other two

ways are living a "healthy lifestyle" and undergoing therapy (or the denial and lack thereof). In this trifecta of coping strategies, not everyone turns to humour. Each person must pick his/her own poison. Having a sense of humour is a key skill, as a career in healthcare will inevitably permeate every aspect of our lives as medical professionals. Humour can alleviate some of the heavy clouds that form in the course of our work. More importantly, humour helps us put our experiences into perspective. Be it good, bad or fleeting, learning to acknowledge our identities as flawed humans who experience life as fully as the next person

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is vital in keeping our focus on our passion. At the end of the day, when we can let go of our day's work and can draw meaningful experiences from our lessons, we move forward collectively for ourselves and those we love and care for.

We will be taught over and over in our careers about various pharmaceuticals used to treat illnesses. What we will not be taught as definitively is how to engage patients with a lighter spirit, and how to bring comfort to them in their times of need and distress. When under the pressure of a life hanging in the balance, it is easy to forget how to be a human being. Yet, there is something comforting and skilful in relating to our patients and experiences with kind humour. It has the power to connect two

people who would otherwise be stuck maintaining the awkward and tense relationship of a doctor looking at his/her patients' scans. It can lift a burden off the bare-bones team that has just covered multiple wards in a single night. It can also soothe a patient's family and his/her healthcare provider who has witnessed the struggle of a death. Whoever has said that laughter is the best medicine has got it pretty much right.

Embracing humour

I am well aware of the life that my career path entails. I am sure that many of us who have spent sleepless nights anxiously preparing for our medical school interviews and examinations did not choose our careers lightly either. Regardless of how taxing and frustrating this choice becomes, I fully believe that life in healthcare is meant to be experienced, to be processed with our thoughts and emotions. I seek to be a doctor who does not become apathetic to my patients 40 years down the road, to still be able to learn from my peers and my experiences, and ultimately to keep the spark that creates meaning in my life. For me, I will keep curating this special gift of humour, and I hope that my colleagues can too. Life is not meant to be lived without joy. ♦

Shayna is a Year 1 medical student at Cardiff University.

