

Thoughts from the Threshold:

The HO Year

Graduating from medical school and becoming a house officer (HO) is a rite of passage and momentous turning point for those who pursue medicine. In this article, we invite three newly minted HOs to share with us their thoughts and hopes as they enter this watershed year.

Text by Dr Joycelyn Soo Mun Peng

Dr Soo, correspondent at *SMA News*, is a recent graduate of the National University of Singapore. She is a junior doctor and enjoys going on long walks when she is off work.



"How'd it go?"

"I've finally finished five years of university!"

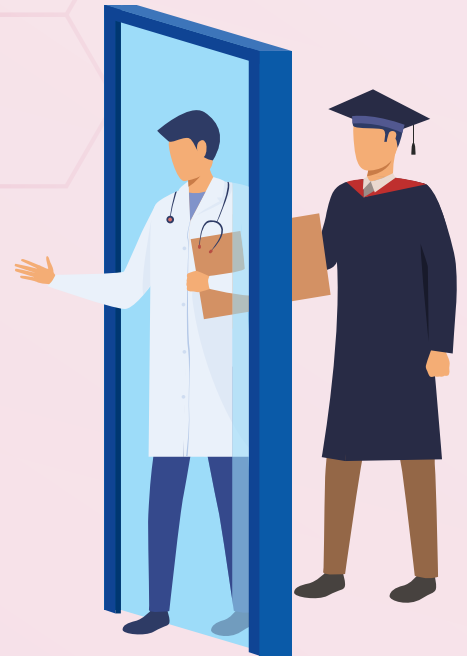
Someone once told me that "the days are long, but the year is short", and I have found this saying entirely applicable to describing my medical school journey and life as a junior doctor thus far. Going for convocation marks an official close to this chapter of my life, and my reflections and thoughts are as follows.

What I have learnt is that one should be expecting of hardships, yet aware that help can come in unexpected ways. I am extremely grateful for my Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery (MBBS) practice buddies, whom I met under the most unexpected circumstances. Together we have built a lasting bond, taking "knock, knock, wash hands" to another level of internalisation, trudging through an average of six to seven hours of examination waiting time together. Alas, we are now all practising medicine in different clinical clusters, but we continue to serve as dependable pillars of mutual

support when our going gets tough. I am also deeply appreciative of my *shi fu*/mentors who have generously shared ward tales and clinical pearls to help me navigate through my academics, work and life. Doing my first "post-take" ward round was manageable because of the lovely Student Internship Programme interns (SIPs) and co-HOs who generously contributed their time and energy, making small things like running to the washroom and grabbing a quick bite possible to tide through the seemingly endless list of to-do tasks.

Now that this chapter has been written, the light falls on a fresh page and a new chapter begins. Facets of work will merge with life and morph into new sources of pressure, pleasures and pastimes. I continue to be grateful for my kind bosses and seniors. I recall the trepidation of my first call – scribing for my first trauma case, clerking my first set of active patients with bosses, and being just pumped full of adrenaline till the next morning. My nerves were greatly calmed when my message pleading for my bosses' patience earlier on in the day (as my co-HO and I were both on our first call) was met by joking replies of "My first call too!" and "Me three!". I am cognisant of the inadequacies that are inherent to inexperience and I am thankful that I grow with each passing day.

Each day, I am reminded that a mistake can be made, but must be rectified and never repeated. It has been immensely helpful to have nurturing seniors who have inculcated a culture of asking questions freely while maintaining



razor-sharp focus on patient care and management algorithms. And of course, it is inevitable to be scolded and to receive harsh feedback from patients, their families or colleagues who are frustrated by the situation, but I have learnt that these frustrations are often directed at circumstances and almost never directed personally. When these do happen, I find being able to end the day and find a quiet place to decompress extremely useful.

To decompress, compartmentalise, assimilate, reflect and grow a little bit wiser... Watching the patients under our care deteriorate and pass on is an expected part of our job, and when it happens through the workday, it is hard to segregate time to properly reflect. I find myself going on walks to give myself time to process this. Speaking with colleagues and medical friends with similar prior experiences has also been very helpful. Recently, one of my seniors asked whether I regretted doing medicine. My reply, without hesitation, was and always will be: "No regrets." Our work, despite its ups and down, is meaningful and even when the days are long, the work has been enjoyable. Being able to compartmentalise, pivot and quickly change perspectives has been useful in trying situations. I do recognise that this is still very early on in my career but I am grateful for these experiences and continue to look forward to practising medicine.

Medical school has been a splendid journey, and I am so excited that our graduating batch of 2024 is joining the wider community of doctors in training.

Text by Dr Tang Haoming

Dr Tang is a graduate of Duke-NUS Medical School, class of 2024, and an incoming house officer at Singapore General Hospital. He enjoys reading Chinese literature and playing tennis whenever he is free to do so.



It felt like a dream stepping on the graduation stage to mark the completion of a second degree after university. Over the past four years, I have been blessed with the chance to form lifelong friendships and relationships with mentors who will continue to guide me for the rest of my medical career. My four years in medical school definitely would not have been

possible without the help and mentorship provided by these awesome individuals who never failed to support me in times of hardship and who celebrated together with me in moments of joy and triumph.

One of the fond memories I have of the transition toward my HO year was learning and working as an SIP, where I was constantly struggling between helping out the HOs with their workload and creating more trouble for them because of their need to vet my work and provide the necessary extra revisions after I was done. However, to my surprise, my entire experience was characterised by numerous opportunities to learn and carry out the work activities by myself, and my fellow HOs, despite their busy schedules and having to navigate through their own challenges of being new HOs, were more than willing to help review my work and even provided extended tips for my future improvement. Some of them even

sacrificed time outside of work to provide us SIPs with tips and tricks to help us become more efficient HOs at work. These little moments culminated in the numerous learning outcomes I achieved at the end of my SIP postings and helped me build confidence in beginning my coming work as a HO.

In addition, I was deeply inspired by their dedication and selflessness in providing ceaseless guidance, and I aspire to advocate for my juniors and provide them ample opportunities to pass on the same kindness and knowledge to future generations of healthcare professionals. As I continue forward in becoming a HO, I hope to continue fostering an atmosphere of camaraderie and bonding with every individual I work with, and to share and celebrate every moment of accomplishment and happiness with those around me.

Text by Dr Rachel Lam Hui Xin

Dr Lam (2024 graduate of the National University of Singapore) is an incoming house officer at Singapore General Hospital. She enjoys chilling at cafes and occasional karaoke sessions with her friends in her free time.



Where shall I even begin? As I greeted the SIP attached to our team, it suddenly dawned on me that I had been in the same position just one year ago and how time flew by in my final year as I struggled to study for my MBBS while maintaining some sanity at the same time.

Year 5 has been nothing short of challenges and roadblocks and looking back, I would not have gotten through it if not for the unwavering support

from my family and closest friends. Just like what most seniors who have graduated medical school would say, finishing MBBS is merely the start of your career, and I am starting to appreciate this sentiment as I embark on my HO year.

It has only been five weeks and the learning curve has been truly steep – both physically and mentally.

Having gone through six calls over the past five weeks has made me realise that the feeling of a patient turning unstable overnight is indescribably scary and unsettling. That being said, I do think that it gets better with experience as we gain more clinical acumen along the way (at least, I hope so). Back when we were students, our duty was to ensure that we learnt as much medical knowledge as possible in the hope of becoming a safe doctor. But as a HO, the lives of the patients are part of our responsibilities. As much as we can escalate to our seniors, it does not quite make this student-to-work-life transition any easier, and this is a hurdle that every HO must learn to overcome.

Being in the tumour team for the past two weeks has further affirmed my struggle to remain kind yet firm, and empathetic yet understanding of my role and limitations as a HO. I tend to get a little emotional when patients share their struggles of their battles with cancer – their worlds crashing down when they were told they had gone from the remission phase to stage 4 cancer in the short span of one month. Yet, knowing how to draw the line between being empathetic and getting emotionally sucked in is so critical, especially when dealing with such cases on a day-to-day basis.

Despite having different forms of adversity thrown at me each day, I am similarly sprung with pleasant surprises each day – patients with their appreciative words of affirmation, allied health care professionals with their kind support and seniors with their gracious treats.

Starting HO year has given me an overwhelming mix of emotions, but the one unifying emotion is gratitude and I would like to hold on to this to carry on with the long journey ahead. ◆