

# BREAKING GROUND

## Text by Shayna Walia

A turn of the seasons has arrived in the UK. Far from the warmth and comforting humidity of the place we so dearly call home, members of the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom (SMSUK) are welcomed by the fresh new scent of autumn air and deciduous flora. Like nature herself at the end of summer, deciding where and how to

start again requires careful forethought. With their own plans for the future, Rachele and Natasha of our growing SMSUK family reminisce about their time off from medical school, while sharing the same tenacity and hope for the year that lies ahead. It is with confidence that they, like us, break rich ground and usher in autumn.

Shayna is a Year 2 medical student at Cardiff University and is the Editor of the 30th SMSUK executive committee.



## Text by Rachele Lai

I remember just a year ago being nestled in a corner of school, furiously flipping through mountains of past-year papers and preparing myself for what I thought was the biggest battle I had to fight – the Singapore-Cambridge A Level examinations. Here I am one year later, drenched in fountain water and my feet rooted to scorching cement, fingers clenched around a plastic cup while ferociously defending a cracker as if my life depended on it. This is our orientation camp – a new kind of war where alliances are ever-shifting and everyone is trying to outwit one another. My teammates are as frightened as I am about the prospect of being attacked, and united in fear of every threatening splash, we find ourselves strategising on the fly like generals on the offensive. It is in these moments of sheer absurdity that the stress of the past year seems to wash away. We are no longer students contriving how best to divide our time or what subjects and topics to prioritise, but rather warriors engaged in a fierce battle of the strongest, a whimsical crusade of courageous combatants bound together by a common goal.

As the battle begins to wind down and we start to collect ourselves, temerity and valiance soon fade into nostalgic reflection. As I glance at my fellow comrades, I cannot help but

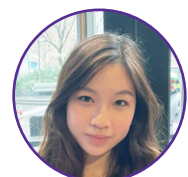
be amused at how this light-hearted moment contrasts sharply with the journey that awaits us. In just a month's time, we will be fighting a new battle of starting university in an unfamiliar land. University will be a journey that promises its own set of challenges and thrills, where we leave behind the enveloping warmth of our nation – the humidity like an enfolding blanket – and trudge into a foreign land where the air is thinner and the heat is sparse. In these moments of transition, I find myself confined to a place of limbo where I am stuck between the past and future – forever wanting to run to the past which holds the solace of familiarity, while yearning incessantly for the adventure that awaits.

Taking the role of newly enlisted soldiers preparing for battle, my group members and I have busied ourselves over the past few months with garnering and sharing intelligence on British culture. We have done our best to piece together an understanding of the terrain that awaits us when we arrive, badgering those who have tread this path before for advice and forming connections with those who shall enter with us. Apart from practical matters, we have also been preparing ourselves mentally for the transition, knowing that we will have to deal with the anxiety, fear and discomfiture that comes with

venturing and ultimately settling into the unknown.

As the camp comes to a close and the group disperses, the weight of our impending transition settles over me. Like reaching the final pages of a cherished book that has kept me enthralled, a profound sense of nostalgia and poignancy overwhelms me in closing this important chapter of my life. The time has come for us to depart from the familiarity of our old routines and narratives and embark on a new journey, leaving the protection of a regulated education system for one unknown. But to all the friends I have made here, my comrades who stood with me on the frontlines, I am thankful for the bonds we have forged and shall hold on to the hope that our paths will cross again on the other side.

Rachele is a Year 1 medical student at King's College London.



**Text and photo by Natasha Cheong**

From the verdant tapestry of New Zealand to the bustling metropolis of Singapore, my journey has been a kaleidoscope of experiences and a ceaseless voyage of discovery, with lifelong learning as a compass guiding my path. The foreign shores of the New Zealand healthcare system offered me a fresh perspective, like a maritime breeze invigorating my mind. The tranquil rhythm of New Zealand stood in stark contrast to the frenetic pulse of Singapore. In the quietude of the Kiwi landscape, I first rediscovered the art of listening, a skill often muffled by the cacophony of modern medicine. Empathy soon followed and bloomed anew, a delicate flower nurtured in the fertile soil of human connection. This gentle bloom is often overlooked in the hallowed halls of healthcare where science reigns supreme, yet it is the essence of healing, a balm for the soul as potent as any medication. As a recent *Singapore Medical Journal* study by Dr Lee et al illuminated, empathy is not merely a soft skill but a cornerstone of effective care.<sup>1</sup> It is the bridge between the detached observer and the compassionate healer.

In the heart of rural New Zealand, I witnessed another paradigm shift in

patient care in a general dentist who tended to each patient with a reverence bordering on the sacred. Here, time was not a tyrant but a companion, a stark contrast to the often hurried encounters in our urban clinics. Time's healing hands allowed for the cultivation of trust and the sharing of stories, serving as a poignant reminder of the human touch that underpins our profession. In the pursuit of efficiency, we risk reducing patients to mere statistics, forgetting that each life is a universe of its own. By reclaiming the lost art of presence, we invite patients to become active participants in their healthcare journey. This partnership, forged in mutual respect and understanding, is the bedrock of a truly healing relationship.

Self-care also emerged as a vital component of well-being. Often relegated to the margins of our busy lives, our spirits require tending, like a garden yearning for nourishment. The serenity of the New Zealand landscape offered a sanctuary for renewal, a place to replenish the soul.

Like a seasoned sailor, I returned to Singapore with a wealth of knowledge, eager to navigate the uncharted waters of medical advancement.

With these insights from my time off, I am determined to weave in the new academic year a tapestry of care that is rich in compassion, knowledge and human connection. This tapestry sits on a loom valuing patients as not merely recipients of treatment but as active collaborators in their healing journey. Let us strive to not only be skilled technicians but artisans of empathy as well, crafting a healthcare experience that is as beautiful as it is effective. In the grand tapestry of life, let our work as healthcare professionals be a thread of hope, woven with compassion, knowledge and unwavering belief in the power of human connection. ♦

**Reference**

1. Lee PT, Loh J, Sng G, Tung J, Yeo KK. Empathy and burnout: a study on residents from a Singapore institution. *Singapore Med J* 2018; 59(1):50-4.

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