

Framing the Tapestry

Text by Christic Moral and Lye Ting Yin



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Almost as quickly as it started, the academic year has begun drawing to a close. With it comes a chance to reflect on and celebrate our growth as we look forward to what lies beyond this milestone. The Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom (SMSUK) welcomed the incoming committee at our SMSUK Annual Dinner, marking the beginning of a new chapter. In this edition of Letters from the UK, incoming SMSUK editor Lye Ting and I look back on the past year.

On change and growth

Christic: Hey Lye Ting! It has been almost nine months since you first joined SMSUK at our orientation camp! It feels like it was just yesterday that we were at the Changi chalets getting to know each other and, of course, trying to solve that puzzling murder mystery in our little group. How has the past year been?

Lye Ting: It has been great! It seems so surreal that just nine months ago, you were one of my orientation group leaders giving me advice about living in London, and now we are having this letter exchange as the incoming and outgoing editors. Time has really flown by!

My first year of medical school was a year of many firsts: my first time living alone in East London, my first patient encounters and my first time joining a sports society. Through all these firsts, I have experienced small gestures of kindness, small insights into my own character and even small observations that offer me new perspectives. These have had a noticeable impact on me.

I also remember feeling hesitant as I walked into my first patient encounter. The few communication skills classes I had did little to make me feel prepared for a real home visit. When I knocked on the patient's door, I was worried about the little things: how to introduce myself, whether to take off my shoes and whether it was polite to sit down. But after a few minutes of chatting with the patient and his family, I soon became enraptured by a deep look at his personal history and how that influenced and converged with his health. Patient visits have since become my favourite part of my medical curriculum. I saw many patients, from people who suffered debilitating strokes to former addicts, living happy, contented lives thanks to strong family support, showing me the incredible resilience that humans can have in surmounting disease and disability.

Compared to last September, I am both more optimistic and confident when treading into uncharted waters, and I am excited to see what the next chapters of my life in London will bring. What about you? How has this last year treated you?

Christic: That is lovely to hear! The transition to living overseas and starting university can be so difficult, but it does come with its lessons. Personally, I often struggle to see how much things change, especially when it seems almost like a fact now that time passes by more quickly every year. If I relied solely on intuition, I would be certain that I have only just started my second year in medical school, and that far too little has changed for eight months to have passed. My impending examinations tell me otherwise, reminding me that we are at the end of the academic year. Sometimes, change happens so slowly that you almost do not notice it, especially when it happens in small steps. This year, I have been taking things more slowly, finally letting go of my yearly habit of telling myself that this will be the time I figure everything out. Counterintuitively, removing these goals might have been my biggest step forward. Instead of big goals with many moving parts, I have found that focusing on smaller systems that are easy to act on has been infinitely simpler to stick with. This way, it is no longer about the end goal, but about doing something, anything that helps, because starting is often the hardest part.

Looking back, I see that the small changes do add up, despite how difficult they are to see. This year, I started having weekly placements at a general practice and a hospital. The countless hours of lessons on communication and history taking in the first year could not have prepared me enough for the experience of actually speaking to my first patient. When a consultant assigned each student a patient to collect a history from, I secretly hoped that our silence would convince her to let us go in a group. Of course, that never happened, and I began my century-long (actually three minutes) wait outside the ward door waiting for the nurses to leave. This cued what might be the most rigid and awkward history-taking known to those hospital wards – a neatly arranged conversation fitting into the boxes I drew in my notebook to remember the different components of a history. From where I am now, I have almost forgotten what that experience had been like, as the countless opportunities to speak with patients, each teaching a small but valuable lesson, have nearly dispelled that awkwardness. For me, easing the pressure to reach perfectly defined goals that were set before knowing the path to get there has given me more opportunities to grow. Besides all the things you have learnt, I am sure you have also had a host of new experiences this past year. Which of these memories is the most meaningful to you?



Photo: SMSUK

Moments that defined our year

Lye Ting: I experienced so many new things this year, so it is quite impossible to choose just one memory as my favourite! However, I started rowing for the first time in university, and my favourite memory was rowing in the United Hospitals Head Race with my novice team.

This race was the highlight of the competitive season, and it was a time trial between the rowing clubs of London's five medical schools. With a thrilling 4.4 km long course down the River Thames, this was a battle of endurance. After months of training while battling hour-long commutes to the boathouse, we were ready to compete for the medals.

However, as we started rowing, disaster struck. A logistical error meant that we had to row without speakers towards the start line, and the coxswain¹ had to rely on his voice alone to relay his directions to the rowers. This was often not loud enough, leaving us confused and late to execute many commands to steer the boat. Yet it was in this chaos that we found camaraderie. We decided to all echo the coxswain's commands loudly to ensure everyone was on the same page. We were all in the same boat, rowing in tandem to manoeuvre the boat safely, slowly building confidence and trust in each other.

When it was finally our turn to start racing, our spirits were high. As the race went on, our muscles ached and our lungs burned, but we stayed motivated, loudly cheering each other on. It took us 15 long minutes to finally cross the finish line and we still had a lengthy paddle back to the boathouse on tired arms and legs. Spontaneously, someone suggested, "Let's put some music on," and we began to sing Katy Perry and Carly Rae Jepsen songs a cappella. As I sang along with my friends, my body momentarily forgot its fatigue and I had the widest smile on my face.

We ended up winning the novice category, even besting multiple intermediate crews on time. Notwithstanding our success, it was this sense of brotherhood on the water that made this race so memorable. Joining rowing has been, without a doubt, my best decision this past year, and I have found a second family with the club. How about you?



Photo: Lye Ting Yin

Christic: I have to say that despite all the chaos, that sounds like such a fun experience, and maybe that is my cue to try something new next year. Like you said, it is hard to think of just one memory to share, but one that sticks out to me was SMSUK's weekend trip to Tenerife. Despite not having seen some of my friends for months and having struggled to find time to catch up amid our busy schedules, seeing each other felt like we had not been apart for even a day. Besides having a million new stories to tell each other, the jokes we made and the quirks in our conversation all remained the same. Honestly, looking back, the trip reminds me much more strongly of the times we spent together and the jokes and conversations we shared, than of the destination or the things we actually did. It was a great reminder that even when things change, we can be grateful for the fact that some things stay the same.



Photo: Lye Ting Yin

Looking ahead

Christic: A year ago, we wrote a similar edition of Letters from the UK in which I looked back on the past year as well. Last year, I chose not to make any specific plans for my holidays, instead prioritising time for my friends and family. Knowing that this is my last full summer break, with my future ones getting shorter, I think that becomes all the more important. But I also think that, by virtue of change and the ways in which my loved ones and I have grown over the past year, we will have even more to experience together. Lye Ting, what are you looking forward to in the summer break and beyond?

Lye Ting: My friends and family, of course! I have not been home since September, and I look forward to spending some quality time with friends and family, hopefully over a good bowl of chilli *ban mian*! I also look forward to the SMSUK orientation camp this summer! I made many close friends through orientation last year, and I am looking forward to helping out as a senior and meeting friends, both old and new!

Taking up the role of editor will not be an easy feat, but I am optimistic to see what this role will bring me. Our members have unique experiences and insights, which is why I am really excited to continue celebrating their stories in future editions of Letters from the UK. To all SMSUK members reading this, I cannot wait to hear from you! ♦

Note

1. Coxswain: a steersman of a racing shell who usually directs the rowers.

Legend

1. The outgoing 31st Committee at our Annual Dinner
2. Lye Ting's Novice Team after racing United Hospitals Head
3. Lye Ting rowing with his team on the River Thames

A Look *Back*

From health insurance to artificial intelligence usage, changes in the profession abound. Amid our bustling days, let us take a moment to pause and take stock of our progress. Are there new goals you are striving for, or have you experienced any challenges that caused you to realign your efforts?

We welcome your reflections on recent years – send us your thoughts at news@sma.org.sg today!

