Investing in Our Junior Doctors Through the Years

Text by Dr Calvin Tjio and Dr Maxz Ho

Dr Tjio is a resident in diagnostic radiology at the National University Health System. He is the chairperson of the SMA Doctors-in-Training Committee and an SMA Council member. He is interested in medical education, quality improvement and artificial intelligence.

Dr Ho is an Air Force medical officer and will commence his A&E residency training in 2027. He is currently vice chairperson of the SMA Doctors-in-Training Committee and serves as the secretary for the Medical Association of South East Asian Nations Junior Doctors Network. He believes that every junior doctor we invest in today becomes the mentor someone else needs tomorrow.

This year marks the 60th year since the establishment of *SMA News*, and it is timely that we take a look back at the history of SMA and junior doctors in Singapore. In the beginning, there was the SMA Medical Officer (MO) Committee which advocated for various concerns, notably house officer call allowances (long ago, our house officers were not paid for going on call).[1] Committee members at the time included current SMA Council members Adj Prof Tan Sze Wee and Dr Wong Chiang Yin, as well as past Council member Prof Wong Tien Yin.

The SMA MO Committee later became the SMA Doctors-in-Training (DIT) Committee, which has since continued to advocate for our young doctors. For example, in 2016, the DIT Committee received feedback that reservist leave was considered as being part of the leave quota in some institutions, but not in others. Dr Wong Tien Hua, then President of the 56th SMA Council, wrote on behalf of the Committee to the Ministry of Defence and Designated Institutional Officials to recommend that reservist leave should not be considered part of the leave quota for residents.[2] Back then, the DIT Committee members included current SMA Council members Clin Asst Prof Benny Loo Kai Guo, Clin Asst Prof Lim Kheng Choon and Adj A/Prof Ng Chew Lip. Their early advocacy laid the foundation for the continuous investment in the development of our junior doctors.

Changes concerning junior doctors

There has been a lot of talk about healthcare transformation and the need for change. Similarly, over the past few decades, much has changed with regard to the experiences of junior doctors (such as reduced working hours but higher administrative loads), and our current DIT Committee members Dr Caitlin O'Hara and Dr Haidah Kamal have published their findings in the *Annals of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore*.[3]

In medical education, our three medical schools are constantly improving their practices. Singapore's shift to the ACGME-I residency system comes with increased documentation of supervision from faculty, more formal assessments and feedback, and stipulated protected time for learning.[4,5] Yet, despite this, the SMA DIT Committee recognises that many junior doctors need guidance in the workplace. We

hence transformed our junior doctor guidebook into a phone application that is accessible on the go. We know that starting work is hard – our aim is to ease the steep learning curve for new house officers or medical officers, supported by initiatives such as our annual "starter pack" workshops.

In terms of numerical workload, the overall patient-to-doctor ratio has improved. We support the plan from MOH Holdings (MOHH) to increase manpower to enable the 24/80/1 work hour model (a maximum stretch of 24 consecutive hours, cap of 80 hours per week, and at least one rest day per week).[6] However, each patient case is now more complicated. Current junior doctors cite new difficulties in the workplace: a concerning medico-legal landscape, defensive medicine, complex patient needs and expectations, and higher administrative loads. In 2021, the Ministry of Health (MOH) established the National Wellness Committee for Junior Doctors (NWC-JD).[7] Our representatives in the NWC-JD advocated for issues such as improved assistance for doctors at risk of burnout in an increasingly complex healthcare landscape, improved access and competitiveness of career and training opportunities for junior doctors, and automated work-related claims/work-hour tracking through electronic medical record use, allowing doctors to spend more time focusing on patient care.[8]

Helping ourselves, helping others

SMA's slogan is "For Doctors, For Patients". Amid the evolving healthcare landscape and assistance of artificial intelligence, we must continue to strive for clinical excellence and invest in ourselves. Beyond medical expertise, there are numerous soft skills and hidden curriculums that are equally important to develop. Examples include communication skills and documentation, resource management and allocation as well as quality improvement. With improved patient-to-doctor ratios, there are concomitant reduced learning experiences for junior doctors. Educators and learners need to be aware of any deficiencies that arise in training and actively address them.

There have also been increased efforts nationwide to support the mental health of our population. Concerns raised by junior doctors in this domain include the fear of stigma in the workplace and being treated differently from other doctors if they were to declare their symptoms or diagnoses. Together with representative psychiatrists and occupational health physicians from the College of Psychiatrists, Academy of Medicine, Singapore (AMS) and the College of Public Health and Occupational Physicians, AMS, the SMA DIT Committee established a workgroup to find a way to support our junior doctors better. The workgroup is developing the Well-Being, Inclusion, Safety and Equity (WISE) Guideline, to support the registration and practice of doctors with psychiatric conditions.

Apart from the numerous workplace improvements, we must not overlook the importance of supportive inter-personal relationships. The SMA DIT Committee encourages everyone to first take care of our colleagues, so that we can take better care of our patients. Nowadays, there are numerous avenues for junior doctors to turn to for help, be it within their department, hospital, MOHH or even outside of the workplace. We implore everyone to not go through medicine alone and to ask for help when you need it. Both senior and junior doctors should recognise that they play a pivotal role as mentors, near-peer teachers and friends.

The SMA DIT Committee will continue to advocate for junior doctors and medical students. We believe that every junior doctor deserves the same care and support that he/she gives to his/her patients. One day, our junior doctors will become the senior doctors taking care of Singapore's population. Let us continue to work together to support our junior doctors in their journey to become competent, confident and compassionate health-care professionals. ◆

SMA Doctors-in-Training 101

Android

1. Open page settings > Click "Install app"
2. Click "Install"

iPhone

1. Open in Safari settings > Click "Add to Home"

To stay up to date with the SMA DIT Committee:

- Join our DIT Telegram channel *@helpourjuniordocs*
- Follow our Instagram page *@jrdocs.sg*

If you are keen to get involved with SMA DIT efforts, please write in to us at *dit@sma.org.sg*.

References

1. Tan T, Tan C. From Apprentice to Master – Interview with Dr Wong Chiang Yin. SMA News 2025; 57(2):16-9.

2. Doctors in Training. In: Singapore Medical Association. Available at: https://www.sma.org.sg/page/doctors-in-training-20. Accessed 2 September 2026.

3. O'Hara CA, Kamal NHA, Ong ECI, et al. In my time: A qualitative exploration of the junior doctor experience in Singapore over the years. Ann Acad Med Singap 2025; 54(9):542-60.

4. Lum LHW, Poh KK, Tambyah PA. Winds of change in medical education in Singapore: what does the future hold? Singapore Med J 2018; 59(12):614-5.

5. Ng CL. The Times They Are A-Changin'. SMA News 2018; 50(7):5-8.

6. Low I. Focusing Efforts for Junior Doctors: Meeting with MOHH. SMA News 2024; 56(2):22-3.

7. Ministry of Health. Keeping healthcare affordable and improving the well-being of healthcare workers 2022. Available at: https://bit.ly/4ycUqxK. Accessed 2 September 2026.

8. Goh YX, Tjio C, Tan T, Low I. Our Path of Advocacy: Junior Doctor Wellness. SMA News 2023; 55(7):18-20.

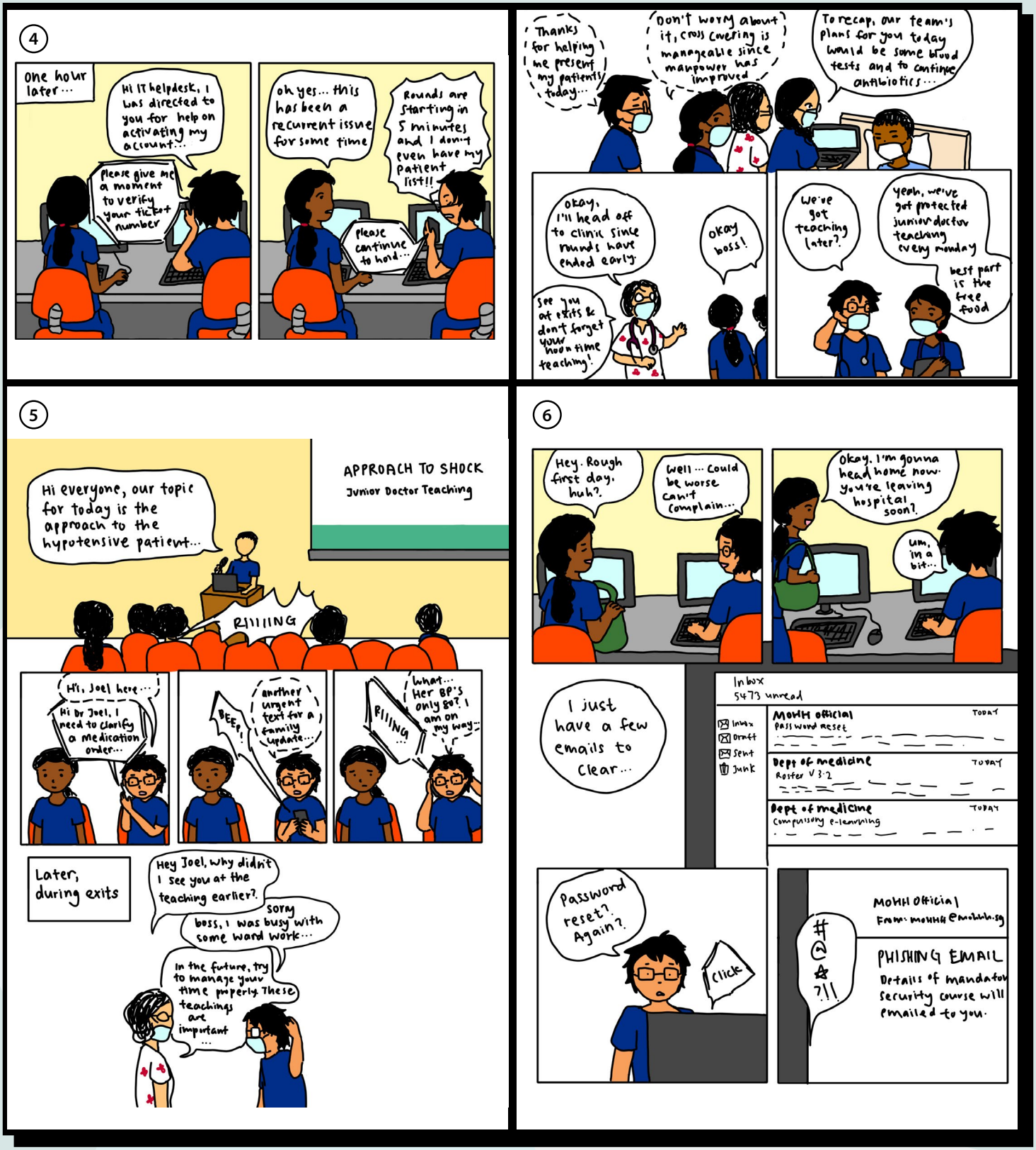
The Winds Have Changed:

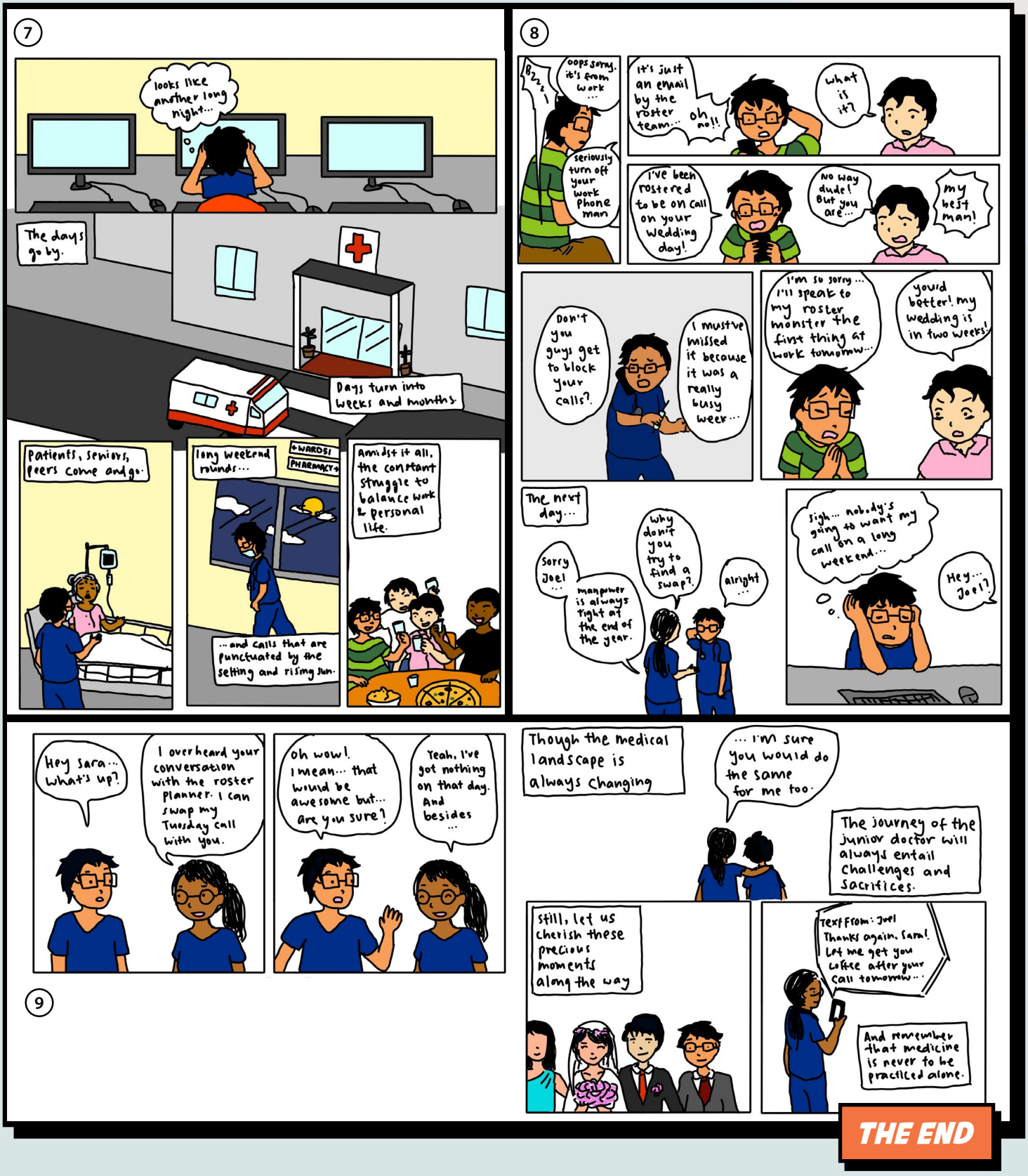
A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A JUNIOR DOCTOR IN 2026

In this illustration, we review some current issues in the junior doctor workplace (some old, some new).

Note: These are fictional characters, but the stories in this comic are based on multiple junior doctors' real-life work experiences in Singapore's public hospitals in 2026.

Illustration by @cryingin7eleven


4
One hour later…
Hi IT helpdesk, I was directed to you for help on activating my account…
Please give me a moment to verify your ticket number
oh yes… this has been a recurrent issue for some time
Rounds are starting in 5 minutes and I don't even have my patient list!!
please continue to hold…
Thanks for helping me present my patients today…
Don't worry about it, cross covering is manageable since manpower has improved
To recap, our team's plans for you today would be some blood tests and to continue antibiotics…
Okay, I'll head off to clinic since rounds have ended early.
Okay boss!
See you at exits & don't forget your noon time teaching!
We've got teaching later?
Yeah, we've got protected junior doctor teaching every monday
best part is the free food
5
APPROACH TO SHOCK
Junior Doctor Teaching
Hi everyone, our topic for today is the approach to the hypotensive patient…
RIIIING
Hi, Joel here…
Hi Dr Joel, I need to clarify a medication order…
BEEP!
another urgent text for a family update…
RIIING…
What… Her BP's only 80? I am on my way…
Later, during exits
Hey Joel, why didn't I see you at the teaching earlier?
Sorry boss, I was busy with some ward work…
In the future, try to manage your time properly. These teachings are important…
6
Hey. Rough first day, huh?
Well… could be worse can't complain…
Okay. I'm gonna head home now. You're leaving hospital soon?
Um, in a bit…
I just have a few emails to clear…
Inbox
5473 unread
Inbox
Draft
Sent
Junk
MOHH official
Password reset
TODAY
Dept of medicine
Roster V3.2
TODAY
Dept of medicine
Compulsory e-learning
TODAY
Password reset? Again?
Click
#@&?!!
MOHH Official
From: mohhh@mohhh.sg
PHISHING EMAIL
Details of mandatory security course will emailed to you.


7
looks like another long night...
The days go by.
Days turn into weeks and months.
Patients, seniors, peers come and go.
long weekend rounds...
WARDS!
PHARMACY
...and calls that are punctuated by the setting and rising sun.
Amidst it all, the constant struggle to balance work & personal life.
8
oops sorry. it's from work...
seriously turn off your work phone man
it's just an email by the roster team...
oh no!!
what is it?
I've been rostered to be on call on your wedding day!
no way dude! But you are...
my best man!
Don't you guys get to block your calls?
I must've missed it because it was a really busy week...
I'm so sorry... I'll speak to my roster monster the first thing at work tomorrow...
you'd better! my wedding is in two weeks!
The next day...
Sorry Joel...
manpower is always tight at the end of the year.
why don't you try to find a swap?
alright...
sigh... nobody's going to want my call on a long weekend...
Hey... Joel?
9
Hey Sara... what's up?
I overheard your conversation with the roster planner. I can swap my Tuesday call with you.
Oh wow! I mean... that would be awesome but... are you sure?
Yeah, I've got nothing on that day. And besides...
Though the medical landscape is always changing
...I'm sure you would do the same for me too.
The journey of the junior doctor will always entail challenges and sacrifices.
Still, let us cherish these precious moments along the way
Text from: Joel
Thanks again, Sara! Let me get you coffee after your call tomorrow...
And remember that medicine is never to be practiced alone.
THE END