

Balancing the Work-Life Equation

The average woman needs to juggle the many hats she wears at work and at home, and it's no easy feat to maintain the right balance. For women doctors, the situation becomes even more complicated with irregular shifts and packed clinic slots. Four women doctors at different stages of their careers tell SMA News how they balance the delicate work-life equation.



Dr Joanna Chan is a senior resident in Emergency Medicine at SingHealth. She is expecting her first child in February next year and will be taking no-pay leave to extend her maternity leave as she wants to spend more time with her newborn.



Dr Irene Chua is a senior consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist who runs her own private practice at Gleneagles Medical Centre. She has published in numerous scientific journals and is invited to speak regularly at conferences and seminars both locally and internationally.



Dr Chie Zhi Ying is a transitional year Family Medicine resident with National University Health System (NUHS). She is a freelance writer for Lianhe Zaobao, Health No. 1 and other health magazines.



Dr Juliana Poh is a part-time emergency physician and full-time mother, who dabbles in research, education and clan work, leaving no time to spare.

1 What is work-life balance to you?

Dr Chie Zhi Ying – CZY: Work-life balance to me means enjoying every moment and attaining a sense of self-actualisation. It also means looking forward to living every day to the fullest, and feeling contented and satisfied at the end of each day.

Dr Joanna Chan – JC: Being able to spend meaningful time with the people who matter to you while continuing to be responsible in one's daily work.

Dr Irene Chua – IC: Work-life balance means that I am able to have a fulfilling practice and provide the best care for my patients, yet also do the things I want and spend quality time with my loved ones.

Dr Juliana Poh – JP: Work-life balance is achieved when one enjoys both working and non-working hours equally. Work shouldn't drain a person to the extent that other life commitments cannot be dealt with, neither should work become an avenue for one to avoid the latter.

2

Is work-life balance even possible in the medical profession? Why do you think so?

IC: Work-life balance is entirely possible in the medical profession. It is all about prioritising and only taking on what we can handle. I try not to overcommit and spread myself too thinly.

JP: Of course! But only if you work towards it! For a few years after graduation, I enjoyed my work so much that I met my fiancé only once or twice a month! As life's priorities changed over the years, I had to trade career progression for my family, which I was happy to do.

JC: It is possible, but more difficult in certain departments and during certain seasons (don't expect a life during houseman year, killer postings, and so on). It's important to consider this before choosing one's career path. Have realistic expectations.

CZY: It is certainly possible, but also highly dependent on which career path you choose. Certain specialties demand trainees to devote a great deal of their time to training. That being said, work-life balance could still be achieved if one makes an extra effort to slot in time to relax.

3

How has your healthcare institution or workplace helped in maintaining work-life balance?

IC: We limit the number of patients seen in a day. If I need to attend to my patients after office hours, I try to do so after my family has fallen asleep so that I can spend their waking hours with them.

JP: When I made the decision to go part-time, my ex-head of department was supportive. My emergency department shifts were adjusted so that I could carry out my domestic roles. My colleagues accommodated the shift adjustments when they could, and I'm grateful for that.

JC: Firstly, the introduction of a cap on working hours with the residency system. We used to work more than 100 hours a week as pre-residency junior doctors, but the cap is now 80 hours a week for residents. Secondly, now that I'm in the emergency department, I have lesser hours in shift work as compared to in wards.

CZY: NUHS has the float system which effectively reduces on-call hours, and there is mandatory leave to clear for each house officer posting. We also have a brand new comfy residents' lounge to relax in.

WORK

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How would you counsel a fellow colleague who is experiencing stress or burnout?

JC: If it is possible to apply for leave, take it. If you have difficulty coping, there is no shame in saying no to extra work. In the long run, constant burnout is counterproductive for the system and may even cause you to leave Medicine.

JP: We all feel torn at times. Re-evaluate your goals in life. Make a list of the things you want to accomplish and set realistic targets to achieve them. Speak to a colleague or family member who might be facing the same issue for new perspectives on the difficult situation.

DINNER

5

What do you do to nurture yourself physically, spiritually and emotionally?

JP: Participating in the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan's activities allows me to meet people outside Medicine. At the same time, I can learn about Chinese culture and history, and education in the Huay Kuan schools. This year, I also started quilting with an entry-level sewing machine; I have never realised that sewing entailed so much geometry!

CZY: I will indulge in the simple pleasures in life, whether it is talking to someone close to me or pigging out, it relieves the mundanity of the daily grind. Of course, nothing beats having a good night's sleep, which will solve at least half of one's woes.

JC: I make an effort to get enough time to eat and sleep, read the Bible and have some quiet time with God. I spend a lot of time talking to my husband, and varying my routine, including simple activities like meeting up with friends or taking a walk to the nearby NTUC supermarket.

BILLS

6

How do you carve out time for significant people in your life amid your busy work schedule?

IC: I make it a point to set aside time to ensure that the important people in my life know that they mean a lot to me by taking occasional Saturday mornings off to spend time with them.

JC: After spending a certain number of years in the system, busyness becomes more seasonal and it becomes easier to plan ahead to set aside certain dates for family and friends. On some occasions, work takes priority; at other times, family is more important. Shift work actually helps too.

TEAM
WORK