

ACHIEVING SPECIALIST STATUS IN SINGAPORE – AN IMG’S JOURNEY

By Dr Aung Myint Oo



Dr Aung (back row, sixth from left) with his Tan Tock Seng Hospital General Surgery colleagues at a retreat in 2013

IN AUGUST, the SMA News Editor invited me to pen a piece about my path towards becoming a specialist in Singapore. I happily agreed, in the hope that it could provide international medical graduates (IMGs) with a better understanding of training opportunities here.

The road I travelled

I initially joined the Department of General Surgery at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) as a self-funded clinical observer in 2004, after my graduation from medical school and internship in my homeland.

Three months later in February 2005, I was given the chance to become a hospital-funded clinical fellow for one year. As an IMG not holding a degree from a university specified in the Second Schedule of the Medical Registration Act or a registrable postgraduate medical qualification recognised by the Singapore Medical Council, I was only eligible to apply for a temporary registration to undergo training as a clinical fellow. At that time, my plan was to take the MRCS (UK) examinations during my clinical fellowship and pursue further advanced specialist training (AST) in Singapore.

During my first three months as a clinical fellow, I was rostered to do step-down night calls as a house officer, which helped me greatly in familiarising myself with the local hospital system.

As a temporary registrant, I was not eligible to apply for any basic specialist training (BST) posts back then. It was also necessary to complete four different surgical postings in 24 months prior to taking the final MRCS (Part 3) examination. I was fortunate enough to be able to rotate to other surgical postings such as Urology, General Surgery, Orthopaedic Surgery and Anaesthesiology, with the approval

from various hospital department heads.

Because my performance was deemed satisfactory, my contract was renewed after a year. I was allowed to take my MRCS examinations with support from my department and its head A/Prof Chia Sing Joo. Luckily, I passed all the examinations on my first attempt and obtained my MRCSEd diploma in 2007, within two years after my temporary registration. My MRCSEd qualified me to apply for conditional registration, and I was also promoted to a medical officer (specialist) (MOS) in the General Surgery department at TTSH.

After working as an MOS for a year and three months, I applied for a registrar position. In November 2008, after passing my MMed (Surgery) from the National University of Singapore, I was offered the non-training post of a service registrar, and accepted it. After six months, I successfully applied for an AST position and became a provisional registrar (AST) in May 2009. Being an IMG who had not undergone formal BST in Singapore, I was barred from backdating my six months of service registrar work into my four years of AST.

I obtained my full registration in December 2010 while I was still undergoing the AST programme. I completed all my necessary postings and finally took my joint FRCSEd exit examination in Hong Kong in March 2013. I was very fortunate to pass it on my first attempt, and was conferred my Certificate of Completion of Specialist Training in May the same year. Then, I successfully registered as a specialist in General Surgery with the Specialist Accreditation Board, and also rose to the position of associate consultant in my department at TTSH.

Currently, I am undergoing my Health Manpower Development Programme (HMDP) fellowship training in minimally invasive upper gastrointestinal surgery at Seoul National University Bundang Hospital in South Korea.

Challenges encountered

As an IMG trained in a developing country, I encountered a lot of challenges when I started working in Singapore. The first was language. Even though the medium of instruction in medical school back home was English, it is not my native tongue. I have to admit that I had some difficulties communicating in the language when I originally arrived here, even though I had scored Band 7.5 out of 9 in IELTS (or International English Language Testing System). To improve my English, I listened to the BBC and Channel NewsAsia news programmes every day. The good thing was that I could speak Mandarin fluently, which really helped me a lot.

The second challenge was the medical IT system, which I had to expend considerable efforts to learn as it was completely new to me.

The third was homesickness. Alone in an unfamiliar land with very few friends and acquaintances, I had a difficult time at the beginning. Fortunately my seniors, friends and colleagues provided me with support, encouragement and help, or I might not be able to achieve what I have now.

Although Singapore was the first foreign country I had lived in up to that point of time, I fortunately didn't experience much cultural shock and managed to integrate well with my seniors and colleagues.

My training experience

Although I started as a clinical fellow, I was given equal training opportunities as other local trainees. So apart from remuneration, I didn't feel that I had been treated any differently. I attended teaching rounds and tutorials conducted by Prof Raj Mohan Nambiar, Prof Low Cheng Hock and other seniors, which helped me immensely in both the MRCS and FRCS exit examinations.

I am not sure whether others will agree, but I felt lucky to undergo the old AST system. Despite taking a longer time to exit (a total of eight years and three months: two years and six

months as a clinical fellow, one year and three months as an MOS, six months as a service registrar, and four years as an AST), I benefited from many operating experiences and training opportunities. At that time, there were only nine or ten General Surgery AST training posts available for application every six months nationwide, and thus the total number of trainees were limited. Hence, while we were busier back then as compared to now, we nevertheless had more training opportunities during that period of time.

Suggestions for IMGs

To IMGs who are interested to train in Singapore, I would like to say that there are a lot of openings here, provided you are a hardworking team player with integrity, a good attitude, and can also demonstrate ethical and professional behaviour. If you are equipped with all these prerequisites, your dream of becoming a specialist in this country will be within reach.

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