

# TEN YEARS ON...

By Dr Ashok Tahilyani



Dr Ashok (centre), celebrating with Dr Paul Ong (fourth from left), Dr Lim Ing Haan (first from right) and colleagues, after presenting his paper at the 2013 congress of the European Association of Percutaneous Cardiovascular Interventions

**FOREIGN TALENT** has always been a much debated topic in Singapore. I used to be one of them. Born and brought up in Bhopal, capital of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, I first came to this country in 2004. Looking back, it certainly has been a long, exhilarating and meaningful journey in local Medicine. Over the years, I have experienced the winds of change and witnessed major decisions that have significantly and substantially

transformed the medical fraternity. I have been here for more than ten years and it is now the right time to share my experience with all my seniors, peers and juniors, both local and from overseas.

### Coming to this country

More than a decade ago, from 2002 to 2003, Singapore weathered the terrible SARS epidemic. That difficult phase also substantially affected its

healthcare system, highlighting an obvious need for more doctors, nurses and other medically trained workers. The nation was left with no other obvious choice but to look for foreign talent mainly from the region.

During that hunt for foreign talent, I was one of the few Indian-trained doctors who had been shortlisted for an interview. I passed the interview, but felt very apprehensive and a little anxious about going to Singapore. Nonetheless,

after a very long discussion with my family, I finally decided to come here for a year on a contract basis.

I had then recently graduated with an MBBS from Gandhi Medical College in Bhopal. However, my basic degree was not recognised by the Singapore Medical Council, so I could only apply for temporary registration (something that was tough for me to understand, though).

I decided to downgrade myself and agreed to work as a junior doctor at Singapore General Hospital (SGH). I was designated a clinical associate, and started from scratch. Although my job scope was the same as that of any medical officer (MO), it came with a little more responsibility. Every day I had to prove that I was on par with any other local-trained MO or even better than them.

### Dealing with challenges

After exactly one month in Singapore, I was rostered to perform a night call in SGH. It turned out to be a complete nightmare. But as days passed, I started to enjoy my night calls, as I learned a lot during those times, in particular, gaining understanding of local patients, their culture and beliefs.

Of course, I committed my fair share of mistakes, which definitely taught me a great deal. I promised myself not to repeat them, and kept myself going despite the depressing initial phase of settling in Singapore.

Over time, I also became competent at making my own decisions while managing complex and critical patients. This learning curve was the steepest of them all. It caused me to cry countless times. But one thing motivated me to continue working – my commitment to myself not to give in easily no matter

what happened. The spirit of achieving success, that my parents and teachers taught me, kept me alive. No matter how arduous my circumstances turned out to be, my goals were not impossible, but “I’m possible”.

With this promise in mind, I resolved to pursue the MRCP (UK) postgraduate qualification. My first attempt of the MRCP examination made me realise that no matter how much (or little) I knew to deal with critical patients, I needed to be exam smart to do well instead. Thereafter I took this examination multiple times, but always failed by 0.5% to 1%. After long hours of hard work and struggles with my books (especially after the exhausting post call periods), I *finally* passed!

I was later promoted from clinical associate to MO, before joining the Internal Medicine training programme, and am currently a registrar.

The challenges I encountered were not limited to the career front, but also affected my personal life. Upon landing in Singapore, I took a while to get accustomed to the differences in culture, language, way of life and so on. Above all these aspects was the issue of food. I was originally a vegetarian. But it was very hard to find suitable food as there were few Indian restaurants around back then. Today, such eateries have mushroomed, but I guess it’s too late, as my time here has turned me into an omnivore!

In 2011, I took the momentous step of renouncing my Indian citizenship. The transition from foreigner to Singapore citizen subjected me to sleepless nights and restless days, but as the saying goes, “everything happens for your own good”. I am now very happy to be a Singaporean, along with my family.

### Giving thanks

I started out a little nervous to swim in a big sea, but have successfully ventured into the deep. Thanks go to all those who helped me take the plunge by teaching me the tactics of survival here, how to practise Medicine and above all, in making me a good doctor.

I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my mentors and heroes, like Prof A Vathsala, Prof Wong Kok Seng and Prof Peter Lim, who had always kept my morale high during my early days in Singapore. Those who have contributed to my career progression in some way or other include: Dr Dennis Seow, Dr Daniel Wai, Dr K Gunasegaran, Prof Lim Soo Teik, A/Prof David Foo, Dr Paul Ong, Dr Ho Hee Hwa, A/Prof Ooi Yau Wei, Prof Paul Tambyah, Dr Phua Ghee Chee, Dr Tan Keng Leong, Prof Chow Wan Cheng, Prof Ooi Choon Jin and many others. Without their expert opinions and advice, I would not be where I am today, and I’m sure these excellent teachers will guide many more Ashok Tahilyanis to come in the future.

I am also indebted to the Singapore medical system for introducing the foreign talent recruitment policy, thus allowing foreign-trained professionals like me to work in this country, serve this society with efficiency and contribute to its health and well-being. ■



Dr Ashok Tahilyani, MBBS, FCCP, GDGM, MRCP (UK), is currently a registrar at the Department of Cardiology at Tan Tock Seng Hospital.