

# LEARNING, SHARING and SERVING in the WINDY CITY

Text and photos by Chua Shunjie



*The author spent a fortnight in Chicago in August last year, during which he presented a poster at a dermatology clinical and research conference. He had previously performed basic research at the University of Chicago for portions of his undergraduate and professional life as an engineer before medical school.*

After a long day of catching up with old friends at the Gordon Center for Integrative Science in the University of Chicago, I finally had the chance to revisit parts of the campus that I adored. My favourite haunt had been the reflecting pool at the law school, where I spent solitary hours, thinking of new ways to improve on my practices.

But this time, as I looked into the pool, my mind saw something different, and I realised how much I have changed and matured since starting medical school in 2011. My past two weeks in the city had borne this out.

## Networking and learning from the best

Students from Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School spend the third year of their education exploring their research interests. For my research year, I was privileged to take part in clinical research in the Department of Dermatology at Singapore General Hospital (SGH). Not only did my study allow me to better

comprehend aspects of dermatology, but also improved my understanding of internal medicine's principles of management. Under the guidance of my mentor, Dr Lee Haur Yueh, as well as the department's clinical team, I had a highly fruitful year. My projects were accepted to be presented in the American Academy of Dermatology's (AAD) Summer Academy Meeting 2014, held at the Hyatt Regency in Chicago from 6 to 10 August.

This conference is one of the two yearly meetings organised by AAD. While I had been told that the summer meeting is much smaller than the academy's main Annual Meeting, I did not feel that it was less robust in any way, as it featured a full spectrum of dermatological topics.

I would stay in the conference centre from 7.30 am till 5.30 pm every day, doing my best to cover sufficient breadth. However, with the multiple simultaneous sessions, and no colleagues with me at the event, one of the chief struggles I had was choosing

the right session to attend. From this, I realised the importance of pre-planning for a conference. Instead of merely going over the titles and synopses mentioned in the conference booklet, I would pore over each presenter's profile and publication history, and peruse a representative publication if available.

Besides enjoying the updates in practice and research during the sessions, another aspect I relished was the chance to put a face to the many names that I have read about.

After the sessions, I would always make my way to the front to chat with the presenters. One thing which I found really surprising was the humility they displayed despite their achievements. Despite knowing that I was only a medical student, they gladly welcomed the questions I had prepared. Some of them even offered me their name cards, so that I could contact them if I ever had questions in their area of expertise or wished to be attached to their departments.



for this checkup. This echoed what I had read in the literature: that patients are more likely to change health behaviours, not just because of evidence-based statistics that healthcare workers quote, but also as a result of the anecdotes that they hear about.

I also joined the Chicago Englewood Clinic (partially managed by the University of Illinois) as a student healthcare volunteer. The facility was situated in South Chicago, which had lower income, higher unemployment and higher crime rates, in stark contrast to the downtown area. It was bittersweet to witness the differences in health problems the residents faced. The residents in this part of town suffered from multiple chronic illnesses, and obesity was a prevailing problem. I appreciated the opportunity to bring some of the elderly patients back to their homes, as this allowed me to interact with them and also gave me an inside look into their home environments. As I walked along the streets, all I could see was fried, heavily salted and sugared confectionery and meals. Fresh food was often hard to find. The lack of safe sidewalks and exercise amenities made engaging in physical activities difficult.

### Helping to take care of the community

In addition, I volunteered in a public skin cancer screening run by the Chicago Dermatological Society. It was held in North Avenue Beach, located in downtown Chicago, an affluent part of the city and also an area which most tourists will experience. During the screening, I ushered participants to the tents where dermatologists and residents would perform the checks. Although this may appear to be a menial job for some, I felt that I learnt a lot from this position, as it allowed me to communicate with the screening participants.

I remember a Caucasian female who was really friendly. She recounted the stories of two relatives who were sun worshippers and would frequent tanning bars to obtain the perfect tan. However, their stories took a sad turn when their cutaneous cancer was discovered at an ulcerative stage and resection was no longer enough to save them. This was what compelled her to optimise her sun protection and come



**Clockwise from top left**  
**Arriving early before the AAD meeting began one morning – not a soul in sight!**  
**Busy North Avenue Beach, where the skin cancer screening was held**  
**A proud participant of the AAD conference**

### Looking forward

Pulling my gaze away from the reflecting pool, I noticed the setting sun cast my silhouette onto the road nearby. The long shadows seemed to inform me how much I have grown. But their thin profiles also told me how much more there is to learn to reach my potential and to look forward to, as I develop myself as a student and later on, a physician.

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