

# In Pursuit of Passion

**WE ASKED** a group of doctors and medical students how they unwind in their hours off duty, and they tell us about the various hobbies that they devote their time to.



*Kenneth Chin is a third year medical student at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. He enjoys adventure and often travels alone. Apart from studies and medical illustration, his other hobbies include shooting (pistol and shotgun) and diving. Inspired by the dedication of clinical faculty, he aspires to be a clinician educator.*



*Valerie Tan is a fourth year medical student at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. A person of diverse interests, unconventional art excites her; just as ingenuity, knowledge, anatomy, travelling, diving, dancing, martial arts, meeting new people and learning new things do. She hopes somehow, someday, to be more useful to society.*



*A/Prof Tan Bien Keem is currently head of the Department of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery at Singapore General Hospital, as well as part-time faculty at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. He is the vice-president of the newly formed Singapore Reconstructive Microsurgery Society.*



*Grace Chan is a fourth year medical student who loves to cook and eat.*



*Dr Robin Yong is a full-time doctor with special interests in travel medicine and a passion for photography and travel. He has previously photographed for local newspapers, celebrity magazines and travel companies. Beginning in Venice is his first photo book, with recommendations by world-famous photographers, Jim Zuckerman and Laurent Martres.*



*Dr Raj Kumar Menon is a registrar in the Department of Surgery, National University Health System. Between calls, and after some sleep, he would be happy to bring up passengers who are not too perturbed by the stories in his article.*

# Medicine Illustrated

By Kenneth Chin, Valerie Tan and A/Prof Tan Bien Keem



**MEDICINE IS** fast-paced and rigorous. Whether as a student or a practising doctor, life has always been a rush to achieve tasks and assimilate salient clinical gems. We often get bogged down in our attempts to delineate the complexities of life and seldom get the chance to stop and marvel at the architecture of the human form. This is where medical illustration provides an excellent avenue to achieve such appreciation of the beauty and design of one of the greatest creations on Planet Earth.

## Appreciating illustrations

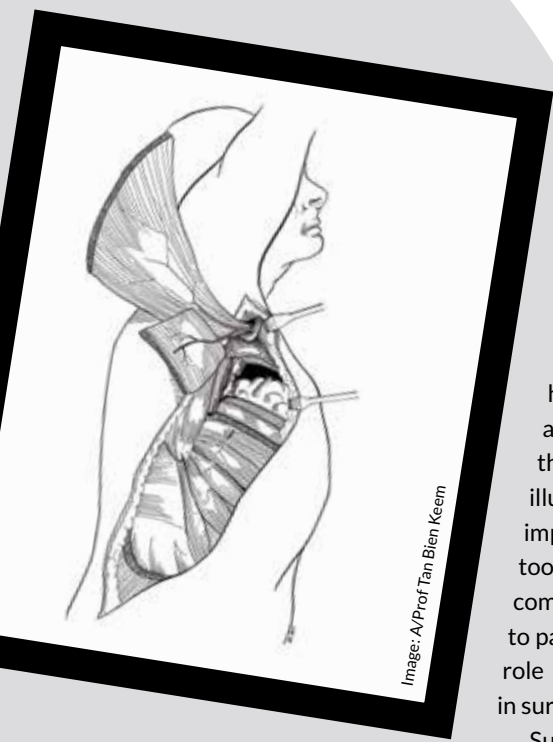
Illustrations are in essence works of art, and art communicates differently with every individual. Some appreciate it in an objective, formalist manner, distilled into the seven physical aspects of colour, space, line, volume, mass, composition, style, as pioneered by German philosopher Immanuel Kant. This form is most appreciable in the godfather of modern anatomy illustrations – Netters. Whereas others find more meaning in the concept, message or feelings the illustration conveys – such as in Bourguery's 19th century works in *Atlas of Human Anatomy and Surgery*. Whichever type one may be, the fundamental idea of draftsmanship, or good drawing, remains the basis of the captivating power of art, especially in terms of medical illustration.

## Drawing as a hobby

Drawing is a journey, where you start with a blank piece of paper and guide its evolution from nothing into something. An array of instruments such as the pencil, pen, brush, charcoal, paint, or nowadays, technology, assists the artist in communicating the subject matter via lines or form. Indeed, the beauty of drawing lies not only in the final outcome, but the process as well. The versatility of these tools allows for creative application of techniques. Physical effects on the artist include: relaxing the mind, teaching perception and fine motor skills, and enhances spatial understanding of the intricate structures within the human body. Most importantly, the process affords him a degree of freedom – allowing individual expression and interpretation of the subject matter.

## Medical illustration interest group

Together with A/Prof Koo Wen Hsin, we have formed a medical illustration interest group where like-minded individuals with the passion for illustration can come together to share and learn various drawing techniques. We welcome all who are interested to join! For more information, you can email Kenneth at [kenneth.chin@nus.edu.sg](mailto:kenneth.chin@nus.edu.sg).



## Drawing as a form of communication

By A/Prof Tan Bien Keem

**JUST AS** a picture paints a thousand words, likewise a well-drawn image or diagram has the power to convey a clearer message. More than just a hobby, medical illustration is also an important communication tool. It enables the communication of concepts to patients and plays a crucial role in education – especially in surgical specialties.

Surgery is an art. Today,

photos and videos are widely available to demonstrate techniques but certain details may be left out. The surgeon who knows a particular operation could, with the help of medical illustrations, fill in missing steps to complete the picture. It helps if the surgeon is an artist himself – he could then create his own sketches, and with the help of a medical illustrator, generate digital illustrations. Otherwise, the surgeon needs to spend time with the medical artist to precisely work out the illustrations he wants, leaving little to the artist's imagination. This is an important first step to avoid repeated corrections, time wastage and ultimately frustration. I encourage every surgeon to publish their surgical techniques with good illustrations. It makes the article interesting and leaves an indelible impression in the reader's mind.

# Joy of Cooking and Baking

By Grace Chan

**MY PASSION** for cooking and baking first developed after a Home Economics class, of which I have little recollection. I never learnt much from those lessons. Instead, a homework task to look for a variety of recipes left me wanting to try each and every one of them. Over the years, this passion has grown.

The kitchen is where I feel most at home, and where I enjoy what I love doing the most. Cooking and baking are ways in which I can express love or share the joy of food with others. There is something special about eating a homemade pineapple tart, and making these Chinese New Year goodies for my friends and relatives has become my yearly tradition. I start weeks before, cooking down the pineapple pulp into a luscious sticky jam and stamping out little flowers of pastry. Handing out these homemade tarts is my way of showing my loved ones how much they mean to me. My birthday has also become an excuse to express my appreciation by cooking a meal for my closest friends.

The kitchen is where I am in my element, also because baking has become my own form of therapy. There is a sweet

exhilaration that accompanies the aroma of freshly baked scones, or the sight of a soufflé rising marvellously in the oven. I always look forward to going back to my kitchen after a long day. Some have asked how I manage to find the time to cook, but well, I have found no good answer to that yet. It is just what I do.



Photo: Grace Chan

Just as an artist who delights in her work, cooking and baking are also the means with which I express myself.

The kitchen is where I can play around with different flavour and texture combinations, and where I can channel my energy and creativity into producing something of my own. The real and honest pleasure of cooking is to be able to use food as a medium to capture and share my experiences with others. By adapting certain flavours into my food or baked goods, I create not just a dish in itself, but also the tastes that accompany a unique memory of my own.

All beauty and gluttony aside, the true joy of cooking is sharing.

# Shutterbug in Action

Text and photos by Dr Robin Yong

**MY PASSION** for photography was reignited by my photography teacher, Jim Zuckerman, and my newfound photographer and Venetian model friends during the Venetian Carnevale in 2014. Prior to this, I had done photo work for some celebrity friends, local newspapers and brochures for travel companies. However, even though clients loved the photos and they were good enough to be postcards, they were only passable by my own standards. I regarded them as normal tourist activities, taking snapshots of scenic places during my travels to exotic countries – nothing too special.

In Venice, I attended a photography workshop conducted by Jim, who was formerly a medical student, but quit to pursue his interest in photography. It was at his workshop that I found my true passion for photography. At the same time, the model friends I befriended (many in their 60s and 70s) were another source of inspiration – their outrageous costumes, often laboriously designed and handmade, together with their passion to create beautiful images, provided many new ideas for my current photo work.

Jim had declared that I needed to be an artist, not just a photographer. He wanted to see some imagination, some wow factor, and some drama – even if I had only two point-and-shoot cameras! My other photographer friend, the world-renowned Laurent Martres, expressed that he liked my photos. He felt that I worked well with portraits and should consider coming up with a photo book.

Many of my non-English-speaking Venetian model friends soon started emailing me, in their respective languages, to compliment me on the pictures taken. Before long, I began to receive invitations to France and other countries to do photo work. At each of these destinations, I found myself being increasingly engaged with the people I photographed. Before capturing their images, I frequently asked them, “How do you want me to photograph you?” Their responses never failed to amaze me! It didn’t matter what the people wore, they would always find the perfect backdrops for my photos. It didn’t matter that most did not even speak English, we would somehow manage to communicate. After the shoots, I made it a point to send my models a photo by email, post or hand, and have noticed that I would obtain even better results in subsequent visits and shoots.

It is no longer just “my” passion for photography – it has become “our” passion.



**From top**  
Sunrise at Angkor Wat – taken at an entrance not used by tourists, with local children walking by...

When I first met Kim...

My friend Marie-Jeanne – taken by the roadside, while waiting for our gondola, with nothing else but a little point-and-shoot...

# Taking Flight

By Dr Raj Kumar Menon

**I AM** not sure when it started. Somewhere in between watching the fly-pasts during the National Day Parade and playing fighter plane simulators on the computer with my friends in secondary school, I have always been fascinated by flight. There is something majestic in seeing an aircraft, with its tapering wings and roaring engines, take to the skies. It is a marriage of simple physics and inspiring design.

Before I started my registrarship, I took a few months off, travelled to Canada, and decided to obtain a private pilot license. My sister had somehow chosen to live five minutes from the local airport, which I took as a sign, and delved into a summer of wind and wings. The aerial experience was incredible. There was a tangible sense of leaving everything behind when your wheels first leave the ground. Flying over tiny cars and expansive lakes into the shimmering sky felt as amazing as it sounds.

The training was extensive, with theory lessons on topics such as meteorology, aviation law, physiology, engines, mechanics and physics. Practical lessons were initially tough. It required an immense amount of concentration to aviate, navigate and communicate simultaneously. There were no modern radar displays or Google Maps in the simple planes that we flew, but only a paper map, your eyes, and a radio for you to announce your position to the world periodically.

Interestingly, I found many similarities between the practice of medicine and flying. Both require quite a bit of studying. In fact, the run-up to my flying theory tests brought back memories of the nights sitting on the wooden benches outside the old medical library. Also, once you do get your licence, you realise that you are just at the beginning of a journey of continuous practice and education, with many skills to apply, refine and maintain. My first solo flight, a trial of passage all aspiring pilots undertake, was reminiscent of my first solo appendectomy – no one is with you in the plane/theatre, you are both thrilled and nervous, while your instructor/registrar is on the ground with a cold drink, ready for when you are done.

And just as you can in medicine, you can, in flying, make mistakes.

Soon after going solo, I was practising “touch-and-go” landings on a sunny afternoon with clear skies. Touch-and-gos involve landing the aircraft, and quickly powering on to take off again – a tricky skill demanding perfection. During landings and take-offs, we follow a strict handheld checklist. Just before take-off, we follow a prescribed sequence – “landing lights on”, “flaps up”, “fuel mixture rich” and so on. As we approach land, we check our gauges, deploy our flaps (to slow us down, but giving us lift in return), and make our radio calls, before finally landing.



Dr Raj after his first solo flight

After the fifth cycle of taking off and landing, I set the checklist aside. After all, I had done this dozens of times alone. Relying on pure memory, I followed my usual sequence of landing lights, fuel mixture rich and applied full power for take-off. I thought it was odd that the aircraft felt sluggish – it was gaining speed but was taking a long time to lift off. Finally I pulled up on the controls, and was airborne. I was still thinking about it when my stall warning alarm blared. *Phwheee*. A stall occurs when your aircraft has no lift and the airflow over your wings is disrupted. The aircraft’s nose dips and it hurtles earthwards. My plane was falling from 500 feet to the ground and I had only about 20 seconds to impact. *Phwheee*. The stall warning persisted. 400 feet. I was looking around the aircraft in desperation. *Phwheee*. 300. And so was my heart rate, I thought.

It was providence that as I was looking left and right, I suddenly noticed that my flaps were down, slowing my plane down so much that it had lost all lift. I had forgotten to retract them after I had landed, as I had ignored my checklist. I quickly retracted my flaps and recovered at 200 feet – probably above some very alarmed cars on the highway below.

Mistakes can happen, and hence a significant part of training is based on recognising human factors – your own cognitive deficiencies, such as fixation, loss of situational awareness, task saturation and fatigue – which are just as important in medicine as they are in flying.

In the end, flying has become more than just an adventure for me. It continues to provide transferable lessons in life. It reminds me to constantly assess my strengths and frailties. It also gives me an appreciation of the world below and how small we are in the greater scheme of things, and till today, it never fails to get me smiling to hear:

“Seletar Tower, this is Niner Victor Bravo Oscar Zulu, ready for take-off on Runway 21.”

“Niner Oscar Zulu, Tower. Surface winds 12 knots. Clear take-off.” ■