

# Called to the Same Profession

## Brothers in Medicine

Medicine is more than just a profession; it is a calling – to serve and do good together as a united profession. But have you ever wondered what it's like having a sibling who shares the same calling? In the following pages, hear from two sets of brothers who reflect on the ups and downs (mostly ups) in their common pursuit of medicine.

Text by Dr Benjamin Soh

My brother and I have always been quite different. For one, we grew up ten years apart with no siblings in-between (no, I'm not an accident), so I often felt like we grew up in different times; his – the era of SEGA, ICQ and dial-up modems (remember when your internet got disconnected every time someone called your house phone?) and mine – the era of the first Xbox, MSN Messenger and broadband. He grew up athletic, representing the school in track and field, while I took a liking to more artistic interests, joining debate and later the drama and photography clubs.

It is perhaps curious that we both ended up in medicine and coincidental that we both took an interest in musculoskeletal medicine. While I can't say for sure how much influence my brother had on my joining medicine, thanks to our large age gap, I had a pretty decent personal idea of the road ahead of me.

In particular, I have often been asked why I chose to do family medicine (with a view to do sports medicine) instead of orthopaedics, given that my brother was already in the field and could mentor me. For that, the answer was clear – I saw the intense

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Reuben & Benjamin

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rigours of surgical life and decided that it wasn't for me! My brother worked in pre-residency times and I would often meet him going home at 7 to 8 pm on a regular day – the one day I met him going home at 5 pm, he was doing post call! As someone who struggled to stay awake after post-call rounds, I couldn't imagine another six to ten years of surgical training of that nature.

At the same time, I must say that the benefits of having an older brother in medicine are amazing – from MBBS tutorials (my clinical group got a three-hour "everything you need to know for orthopaedics during the MBBS" tutorial from my brother), to smooth integration with seniors (mainly in my orthopaedics posting, but also during National Service [NS]), to having a first-hand alternative perspective as a junior doctor of the benefits and challenges that consultants may face.

If it seems like there aren't many (if any) downsides, that would be because my brother is who he is – an ultra "chiongster" who juggled work and examinations, served NS, raised three children and ran triathlons, and yet was still one of the first in his batch to pass his exit examinations. Not only that – he is also a kind and nurturing teacher who won the Dean's Excellence Awards thrice, and rarely ever scolds his junior residents. Perhaps the only downside is thinking how I will ever match such an amazing roster of achievement!

Ultimately, I do feel that my brother and I have gotten closer from being in the same profession. We once grew up in different times, but now we share similar amusing stories from clinical practice; we once had our own mutually exclusive circles of friends, but now we know many of the same people from the SingHealth circles; we once had differing relationships with our relatives, but now just give them free medical consults!

Text by Dr Reuben Soh

*Passion is the fuel that drives medicine.*

Reflecting on my journey into medicine, I see the many lighthouses that guided my path. Two significant ones shine particularly bright. My mother worked as a staff nurse and often had many interesting stories of the hospital. Those stories intrigued me. How and why do doctors make decisions that impact the patient so profoundly? More importantly, why did they ask for a patient to be served meds stat near 3 pm, causing my mum to come home late, resulting in me missing my favourite television programme?

In junior college (JC), I was fortunate to get an observership in anaesthesia and that one week certainly helped me understand what life is like in the operating room. I saw the same surgeon, who performed a hernia repair, hemicolectomy and an appendectomy in the day continue to work through the night, with several abscesses and more appendectomies. However, what struck me was how he continued to have a cheerful disposition even in the wee hours of the morning as he proceeded to debride the groin and thigh of a patient with necrotising fasciitis. It was certainly inspiring to see how many patients he impacted during those 36 hours.

While I am sure there were other events that shaped my decision to pursue medicine, those two particularly stand out. However, I never actually related these to my brother as I did not want to overtly influence him in his career decision. You see, Ben was always better than me in his grades. With his International Baccalaureate score, he could have easily secured a course anywhere else and be in the running for many prestigious scholarships.

At his crossroads of JC and university, I told Ben that a life in medicine is tough. I was then a first-year

orthopaedic registrar and being in a small unit, was frequently on call. I suppose, given that he has seen me falling asleep on the couch post-call, falling asleep on the floor after Chinese New Year reunion dinners and appearing chronically tired, it would have been evident to him that doctoring was certainly not for the faint-hearted. Nevertheless, it dawned upon me one day that he must certainly have the passion for medicine, especially since he could clearly see what lay ahead.

Being born ten years apart, it was interesting to have the chance to give orthopaedic tutorials to his class. It was always funny to hear whispering towards the end of tutorials, to which my query often drew the reply: "We can't quite agree which features you share with Ben Soh!" Recently, a smile appears whenever my residents or medical officers (Ben's classmates) introduce me to others as the brother of the Hulk/Silver Surfer, or as the brother of Singapore's strongest doctor.

Throughout his undergrad days, I saw many parallels in our interests in being part of Playhouse (an inter-batch play competition), building props for rag day, as well as being part of the freshmen orientation committee. Certainly, I think that our "true" age gap has lessened over the years as we have many fun sessions chatting about the dynamics of our workplace or grumbling about the challenges of residency. Thankfully, despite having hectic work schedules and being on call, we have gotten better over the years at participating in family meals especially during the festive season. Family meals continue to be peppered with stories of what happened in the operating room or polyclinic, and I'm sure that my daughters are eavesdropping, perhaps catching a spark of the same passion that drives Daddy, Mummy, Uncle Ben and Auntie Charmaine.



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Kevin & Keith

Text by Dr Keith Liang

Being wrongly called over the phone by fellow colleagues, nurses and pharmacists; being greeted in the lift by strangers and seeing their embarrassed reactions shortly after; facing bewildered parents of patients who cannot believe their eyes when they encounter us one after the other – these are just a few examples of a day in the life of a pair of twins at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH).

The good old twin jokes and questions somehow just never get old in the department. Kevin and I have been working together in KKH for about six years now, and every now and then we still face the usual barrage of questions we've been answering since we were young. From time to time, there's even that little game of "spot the difference".

Having a twin brother in the same profession and residency programme is a privilege that I deeply treasure. I entered medical school one year later than Kevin as I failed to get in the first year I applied. That was naturally tough, given that we had been in the same class almost every year since primary school. It was also humbling as my younger (by one minute) brother was now one step ahead of me in the journey of medicine. However, I knew that it was part of God's plan and although I probably haven't said this enough, I have always looked up to Kevin during this journey. I have relied heavily on his tips and advice throughout these years; whether it was choosing

which microbiology notes to use, preparing for the final MBBS examination or surviving housemanship – I always held his advice in very high regard. Embarrassing as this may sound, he even walked me to my ward a number of times during my initial months in KKH as a new house officer!

Years down the road, Kevin is not only my lunch buddy but also my study partner, a source of support and my lifeline at work when the going gets tough. I know that I can always count on him to help me review a new admission in my ward or help with a difficult intravenous plug. I will always remember the bittersweet memories of studying and practising together for the MMED examination, failing it together (with the exact same score), and then subsequently passing it together and celebrating the fruit of our labour. To put it plainly, we just can't get enough of each other at work, and our colleagues often joke about how ridiculously close we are. Call it separation anxiety if you like, but you can't blame us considering that we've spent most of our lives (plus 36 weeks in the uterus) together!

My journey in medicine would never be the same without my dear twin and I certainly wouldn't have it any other way. God has blessed us with this privilege that only few have, and I look forward to many more years of "twinning" together in this journey.

Text by Dr Kevin Liang

I never dreamt that I would be in this profession, let alone be working alongside my twin brother in the same hospital and department. Our father had passed on when we were still in our early teenage years and due to financial constraints, we did not entertain the thought of this career path. However, God provided for us financially through our granduncle and grandaunt who saw us both through medical school.

My initial journey in medicine started off on a bittersweet note. When I received my acceptance letter from NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, I was elated. However, this joy was short-lived as I soon found out that my twin had not been granted a place. Throughout my first year of medical school, I hoped and prayed that Keith would one day join me on this journey. Well, he eventually did, and for that I am so thankful to God.

In God's divine plan, He allowed both Keith and I to be accepted into the SingHealth Paediatrics Residency Programme at KKH, where we have worked alongside one another since graduation. The opportunity to pursue paediatrics together as a career has indeed been a huge blessing for us and one that we are really grateful for.

Looking back, it has been a real privilege to have a twin brother! Growing up, Keith and I have never been far apart. For most part of our lives, we've been attending the same classes and training in the same

tennis team. From a tender age, we had learnt to look out for one another, take care of each other and even stand up for one another when the need arose. This spirit, I'm proud to say, has not changed one bit over the years.

Having the opportunity to work together in the same hospital and department has certainly been an answer to our prayers. This has allowed us to support, encourage and help one another, especially during busy night calls. It's always heartening to know that we've got each other's back (and tummy) at work. Till today, we're still one another's faithful lunch, study and work companion. Some even say that we have started to develop separation anxiety!

The fact that we look identical also brings about an interesting twist to daily work. Our peers, consultants, juniors and even patients mistake us for each other almost on a daily basis! As a result, we have trained ourselves to respond promptly when called by either name and to smile or wave to anyone who greets us, whether we recognise them or not.

Being together in the same profession and hospital has definitely helped to strengthen our bond with each other. This journey has been such a special and meaningful one for us and I would not want to have it any other way! I'm thankful for this blessed opportunity and I look forward to the road ahead, serving others alongside my dear brother. ♦

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