

ADJUSTMENTS and ADAPTABILITY

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

First, I want to say a warm hello to our youngest colleagues – the newly graduated doctors who are now in the workforce. Some of you have reached out to me personally in the past months to share your hopes and dreams for the future, as well as your concerns during this COVID-19 pandemic.

I hope that you are settling into your work. Housemanship isn't easy at the best of times. With COVID-19 hanging over our heads, this poses an additional challenge. Some of you would have received a forwarded message from one of the doctors who was a houseman during SARS. I hope that you derived some comfort and inspiration from seniors who went through a similar challenge.

These are uncertain times for everyone and it can be very stressful having to face so many unknowns and potential dangers. But I can assure you that you are not alone. Together, we can overcome this.

Uncertainties

Having been in the Editorial Board for more than a decade, and being the *SMA News* Editor for five years, I have always felt that the challenge of *SMA News* is that we are not able to have real-time updates. I am now penning this in early May, for the June issue! Like many of you, I have so many questions about the future. I don't have answers – but I have read many good articles by others that may help to shed some light.

I'm postulating that, by the time you are reading this, Singapore should have lifted the circuit breaker on 1 June, and perhaps we will be seeing the effects of it. Have the numbers of new infections gone up? Have we identified the sources

of contacts? How is the rest of the world doing? Are the new clusters of infections in China and South Korea under control?

One thing that I can now fully appreciate is the fact that history repeats itself. We can look back at past pandemics,^{1,2} and learn from them. The clinical behaviour of the virus may be different, but the human reactions are predictably the same. Heck, even watching zombie and apocalypse movies will give you pretty much the same spectrum of reactions!

Perhaps COVID-19 is a wake-up call for the whole world.^{3,4} Are humans overpopulating the world? We need to be better custodians of the earth. We need to respect animals, their living spaces and their boundaries. People need to give each other space. We need to live in the present moment. I hope that everyone here has found some kind of inner peace during the circuit breaker – with introspection – and picked up some form of mental resilience. We may also have learnt how to make do, and to be thankful for what we have.

Positive aspects in 2020

This is as good a time as any for a pandemic; I don't mean this frivolously. The Internet has allowed the world to be connected in a way never seen before. I grew up in the 90s, and I remember what life was like before the Internet. I choose to look at the positive aspects of technological advances in helping us cope amid COVID-19.

Daily news updates: the challenge is knowing how to differentiate reliable sources from tabloids or fake news. Gov.sg gives daily abbreviated updates, while key medical journals have made

coronavirus-related articles free for all to access!

Social updates: using the social media of our choice, we can keep in touch with friends and families, and even make new friends! Home bakers flourish and MasterChefs are born!

Entertainment: Youtube, or TikTok for those who like to perform.

Work: Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Cisco Webex – for meetings, presentations and conferences. Home-based learning was the bane of many parents working from home, but it did allow for the children to continue with lesson plans.

Online shopping, food and grocery deliveries: there are so many new players in the market with better deals and better services. Even hawkers are using social media to reach out to customers.

Contact tracing: apps and QR codes allow for more efficient, accurate contact tracing.

Telemedicine (TM) is something that has been talked about for a few years, but I don't think there is widespread use of it, as yet. Guidelines are in place and many providers exist – yet some of us are very *hesitant*. I see the pros and cons of it, and while I see the great potential, I am wary of the pitfalls as well. The SMA TM Workgroup hopes to bridge the gap, to ensure that TM is utilised appropriately.

Leadership

Leadership in healthcare, businesses and politics:⁵ Thanks to social media, there is a lot more transparency and accountability. Journalists and bloggers critique leadership everywhere, and these articles are made available to any reader. Anyone can comment, and those of us

who read such posts see the potential toxic effects of “keyboard warriors” or “trolls”. Free speech online may seem like a basic right, but the anonymity allows for cowards and bullies – those who do not take any personal responsibility, and relish in the attention and resulting chaos – to be at their worst.

In *SMA News*, the Editorial Board takes great efforts to curate the articles written to try and reflect accurately what is happening on the ground. We are glad that many doctors have been sharing meaningful reflections on work, and personal anecdotes on how COVID-19 has affected their practices and personal lives. We stay true to our core mission – to have an *SMA* for doctors, for patients.

Healthcare and technology:⁶ The advances are remarkable. Sequencing of the viral genome by various groups is happening at a speed never before possible, and the free sharing of scientific knowledge has allowed scientists and doctors to be even more effective in understanding this illness. The unscientific mind would criticise this as, “how come you all still don’t know anything”. The fact is, the explanation is just too complex to share in a few lines. Doctors should keep up to date with the scientific literature and not just be reading popular news articles for their knowledge. Critical analysis and thinking remains our key weapon. Speculation and extrapolations just confuse everyone. Every doctor is a leader in our

community – your family and your staff look to you for guidance.

The future

Finding meaning in the new world:⁷

Everyone would have suffered some kind of loss. Those families who have lost a loved one to COVID-19 and its complications. Patients who may be living with the sequelae of this illness. Healthcare workers who continue to face daily stress when looking after infected patients. Business owners who are trying to keep their businesses running. Workers who have been retrenched. People who are struggling to make ends meet. The lost months – of work, income, time and relationships – we will never get back.

Experts have been sharing their opinions about how long-lasting COVID-19 may be, and are urging world leaders to rethink the way we run our daily lives. I hope for the best, but am prepared for the worst. How will this affect my practice and my patients? How do I look after my children and my elderly parents and in-laws? How do I keep in touch with friends?

In the coming months, each and every one of us has to rethink and redefine our role in society, and find meaning in what we do.

“We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat.” But together, we will ride out the storm. ◆

References

1. *History.com Editors. Pandemics that changed history. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2WNb2x6>.*
2. *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Past pandemics. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2zfcIGl>.*
3. *Cafaro P. A lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic on the perils of density. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Zkkaex>.*
4. *Hamwey R. Environmental impacts of coronavirus crisis, challenges ahead. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2AO1pG4>.*
5. *D'Auria G, De Smet A. Leadership in a crisis: Responding to the coronavirus outbreak and future challenges. Available at: <https://mck.co/2zSgm9A>.*
6. *Gates B. Responding to COVID-19 – a once-in-a-century pandemic? Available at: <https://bit.ly/3bRF9Yu>.*
7. *Berinato S. That discomfort you're feeling is grief. Available at: <https://bit.ly/36gES0a>*

Dr Tan is a mother to three kids, wife to a surgeon; a daughter and a daughter-in-law. She trained as a general surgeon, and entered private practice a year ago, focusing on breast surgery. She treasures her friends and wishes to have more time for her diverse interests: cooking, eating, music, drawing, writing, photography and comedy.

