



THE CHAOTIC LAST STRETCH OF A UK MEDICAL STUDENT

Text and photos by Dr Denise Au Eong

Life before the COVID-19 pandemic feels like the distant past. My memory of it is hazy. What did I even talk about with friends and family before the pandemic? One now can't go through a single conversation without the coronavirus weaving its way into the mix. It seems like life has turned upside down and this is our new normal.

For two months beginning late December 2019, the world watched as China battled the novel coronavirus – their citizens forced to stay indoors, giant hospitals built within days and healthcare workers rushed in from all over the country to the then epicentre of the outbreak, Wuhan. At that point in time, it seemed unlikely that the virus would reach Edinburgh, Scotland, where I was studying medicine in my final year.

A last-minute plan after finals

My final examinations officially ended in late February 2020. To celebrate the completion of our finals, my best

friend Jess and I decided at the last minute to book a trip to Paris. It was a place we had been wanting to travel to together before we parted ways to do our foundation training, and what better time to do it than immediately after finals?

A few days before my trip to Paris, my parents worriedly requested to FaceTime me. "Aiyo, why are you still going to Paris at this time? The virus situation is very serious!" "Why didn't you consult us before booking your trip?" "Remember to bring some masks, hand sanitiser and antibacterial wet wipes!"

In the beginning, a few governments around the world had likened COVID-19 to "just the common flu". As France had less than ten reported cases before my departure to Paris, I did not understand why my parents were so unduly worried. By this time, they had arranged for some surgical and N95 masks to be delivered to me in Edinburgh. "Okay, okay! I will be very careful in Paris. Please don't

worry," I said, reassuring them that it would be safe to travel.

Early warning signs

Paris was everything I had dreamed of and more – the glistening Eiffel Tower, Laduree macarons, walking along the Seine and endless yummy crepes. Jess and I enjoyed ourselves thoroughly, but towards the end of our five-day vacation, I could sense that the COVID-19 situation was turning for the worse. Maybe I was just being paranoid, but I found myself so thankful that I brought a bottle of hand sanitiser with me and kept washing my hands as frequently as I could. While on the metro, I furiously refreshed the BBC live page for updates on the worsening situation. The number of COVID-19 cases in Paris, and elsewhere in Europe, were climbing. 14, 18, 73...

My academic schedule after finals originally comprised six weeks of elective postings followed by six



weeks of assistantship training in Edinburgh. These mandatory postings were requirements for graduation in late June. I had arranged a three-week elective posting in Mater Dei Hospital's Accident and Emergency Department in Malta, followed by another three weeks in Tan Tock Seng Hospital's Department of Geriatric Medicine back home in Singapore.

Singapore diagnosed its first confirmed COVID-19 case on 23 January 2020. Since then, the number of cases climbed gradually due to imported cases and community spread. An early sign that not all was well in Singapore was an email I received from the National University of Singapore (which was in charge of my electives in Singapore) stating that all electives had been cancelled until the end of August. I was disappointed with the cancellation but consoled myself as it was a blessing in disguise – I would get to spend more time during spring in Edinburgh, my second home. As electives were compulsory, I hurriedly arranged a replacement posting and was very thankful that the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh's Renal Unit was able to take me in.

My parents were now beginning to worry about me going to Malta for the first half of my elective block, and they had good reasons

to do so – COVID-19 was spreading in Malta too. The day before I was supposed to leave for Malta, I received an email informing me that all elective postings in Malta had been cancelled until further notice. This was another heavy blow and I was devastated. I had been hyping up the trip for ages, and besides the disappointment of not being able to learn from and experience the healthcare system in another country, I worried over finding a replacement posting at the last minute, and whether I would be able to recoup the costs I had already incurred in arranging flights and accommodation for these overseas electives.

Emotional rollercoaster

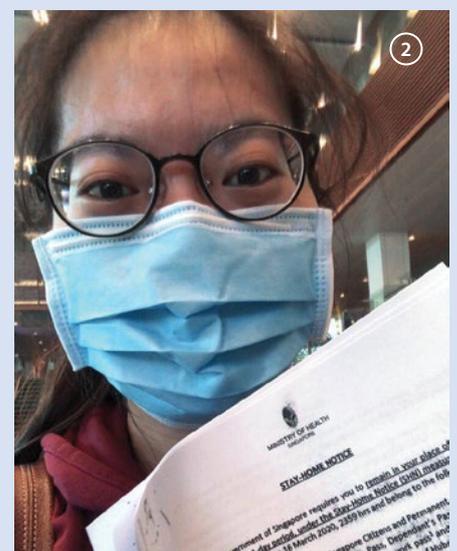
The three weeks after finals felt like a blur as unexpected news and unplanned events came thick and fast. In between bouts of anxiety, tears and fears, as well as furious scrolling through *BBC* articles for updates, I spent five days in Paris, a week in London catching up with friends; had my medical electives, assistantship and even graduation cancelled; and packed for a hastily booked flight back to Singapore. My emotions over those few weeks went through, quite simply, a rollercoaster ride.

Initially, updates from the medical school came in bits and pieces, and everything was uncertain. I kept going back and forth about returning home, afraid that I would miss my up-to-that-point mandatory electives and assistantship, and concerned if the plane journey back would expose me and later my family to the virus. By 17 March, the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an advisory to encourage all overseas students to return home given the worsening pandemic. They warned that many countries were imposing travel restrictions and closing their borders, and transport operators and airlines were cutting their services. Eventually, amid all the turmoil, I decided it would be best to return to Singapore.

14-day SHN

Upon arrival at Changi International Airport, I was issued with a 14-day stay-home notice (SHN) by the Singapore government. I was not allowed to leave my house and confined myself to my bedroom to avoid interaction with my family. The 14 days flew by quickly as I filled my days with good food, workouts, spring-cleaning, and catching up with friends and family over video calls.

During my SHN, Singapore witnessed a spike of imported cases





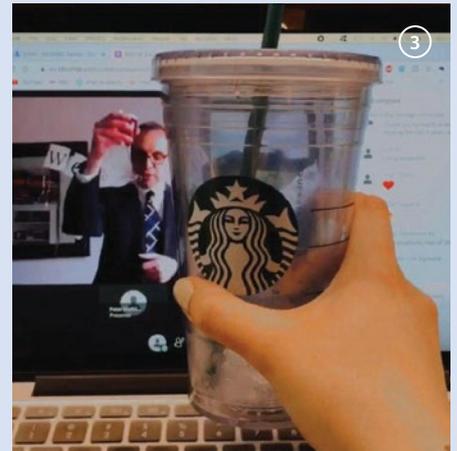
from returning overseas students, especially from the UK and US. I am thankful that I did not develop any symptoms since my return and the 14-day isolation passed uneventfully. I now join the nation in the so-called eight-week circuit breaker, a lockdown of sorts to further mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the community. As I write this, we have completed three weeks of the partial lockdown. Time feels like it has flown by, and yet it hasn't. Another five more weeks to go before the lockdown is hopefully lifted...

Nervous but ready to face an uncertain future

It is difficult to put the barrage of emotions that I have felt in the last month into words. What about the post-finals celebrations? The last flat parties and nights out with my closest university friends? My Edinburgh bucket list filled with all the cafes and places I hadn't visited yet? What about my graduation ceremony, where I was supposed to be dressed in the graduation gown with its crimson trimming and fur hood, surrounded

by the people who have supported me every step of the way? To be honest, I don't quite know how to feel about how medical school has ended for me. It feels like there was no proper closure. This wasn't how five years of medical school was supposed to end, with a virtual "graduation" held over BlackBoard's Collaborate (our university's virtual learning environment) while dressed in my pyjamas.

On some days I still grapple with my own "Brexit", in a sense. COVID-19 has made the future uncertain and at times bleak, but this is what I have been trained for. I am blessed and humbled that against all odds, I've graduated as a doctor three months earlier than expected, and at present am still happy and healthy. My fellow graduates and I are nervous about facing the unpredictable COVID-19, but we feel ready to rise up to the challenge of starting off our medical careers in the middle of a pandemic. We look towards the guidance and knowledge of our seniors before us, and stand ready to do good for our patients and for humanity. ♦



Legend

1. Posing for a quick photo at the University of Edinburgh's McEwan Hall
2. Being served my 14-day Stay Home Notice at Changi Airport
3. Attending my virtual graduation with an (already empty) cup of cider

Dr Au Eong is a fresh graduate from the Class of 2020, Edinburgh Medical School, The University of Edinburgh, UK.



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