

# How Medicine has Destroyed My Life

*Terence Lim rains on his parade*

Not long ago, several local papers ran horror stories on their front pages. No, it was not a photo from "Taiwan's Favourite Hidden Videos", it was not Malaysia calling us names – again, or even some newly discovered asset rich starlet on Channel U. No, nothing quite as exciting. It was rather run-of-the-mill actually, a ritual repeated every year around March, when A-Level results are released.

This year was no different. If it was not "raining As", it was "a bumper crop of As". Metaphors so overused, sentences needed CPR. Sentences already left gasping from the fatigue of carrying too many As between the commas and semi-colons.

There were the usual thoughtful little details on the top students: what their parents did, how many music instruments they played in addition to the piano and violin, their Primary One career resolutions. Details which might be of interest to parents who ship their three-year olds off to tuition classes in between French and computer programming lessons.

There were the smiling shots of top students who all seemed to carry the same self-assured look of those who had over-achieved since they were fetuses. You can imagine they were all good birth weight babies, already shifting the curve back then.

Of course, among these students, a good number had already declared that medicine was the thing for them. In fact, Streets was moved to christen one such curve shifter a "Doc" right on its front page.

One would think that in our more enlightened age, top students would choose something more.... exciting to work towards. MTV VJ? Gourmet food critic? BMW test driver? Model agency booker? After studying so hard for ten years, why would anyone want to be rewarded with more sleepless nights and more studying?

And how come all these hot jobs do not get advertised? If you knew they were available, would you rather spend your time placating potential complainants than eat good food, drive fast cars and watch beautiful people?

My parents - who are not doctors – were never too keen on me being one. Expectedly, I went ahead. And now having trod the predictable and aseptic route, I am left pondering how medicine has destroyed my life. It's a good mental exercise when you are trying to keep awake driving home from call. Maybe if we all start making a list, the curve shifters will get out before it's too late.

## WALKING THE TALK

So you are on a date. And so far, the interview-that-lasts-all-night is going well. She laughs at all your wisecracks, or pretends to, which is also a good sign. She looks you in the eye, and fiddles with her hair constantly.

The next morning, you SMS a lengthy paragraph ending with "Shall we meet up soon?" She replies two days later with "See how." Have I reached her evil twin sister, you wonder. After one month of "see how" you find out she's told all her friends, who told their friends, who told your friends, who told you that she's declared she'd never go out with another doctor because they "walk as if they are rushing for the train and eat as if some time's up bell is going off, by the time he sent me home, I was exhausted".

## MEDICAL IQ = LOW EQ

At the supermarket one day, I bumped into a former patient and his family. This was a very cute two-year old boy whose name I could not remember, but knew had reflux nephropathy with some renal impairment.

Flattered that his parents could still remember me as the bumbling houseman, I was moved to add, "Oh he's really grown up huh, big boy now," even though I distinctively thought he was a little on the short side.

Instantly the atmosphere changed, "Prof says he's not growing well and we are seeing the endocrinologist tomorrow," Mummy stated curtly, looking daggers at me. I could sense she regretted saying she thought I was good with kids and should consider Paediatrics.

I was close to saying "Just being polite, of course I know he looks small", but sanity prevailed. So I begged a fast retreat, claiming I was planning to do Geriatrics.

A few months later, at a family gathering, I carried my cousin's daughter for the first time. "A bit floppy," I thought, and the eyes seem a little slanted. Out of my cousin's hearing range, I whispered to my Mom, "Don't you think she looks a little Down's?"

"You say that and I will kill you," she cheerfully replied.

Lesson learnt: clinical acumen is a poor social skill.

## THE ADULT WORLD

My parents tried to give me a good education. They taught me values like "a man is as good as his word". Unfortunately I learnt at work that, no word is good unless it is written down in the case sheets, regardless of whether it comes from a man or a woman.

Sometimes even that is not enough. Better have some witnesses around. Once I was called back late at night by a considerate senior colleague who noticed I did not document discussing the case with the consultant. "Write it down," he told me, "trust no one."

In my idealistic youth, I thought families would always want the best for their members. Now I know some people would happily dump their bedridden parents in the hospital and scoot off for a holiday leaving nurses to tend to the multiple bedsores. These are the same %&\*\$%& who would be the first to lodge a complaint about long waiting times and late discharges. The ones with the fake accented English, wearing a Patek, in the 8-bedder cubicle. Beware the cuff-linked son of the stroke patient lying in C.

## REALITY CHECK

Of course there are lots of joys to be had in Medicine too. But this article is not about them. What works for me, is realising that I'd rather have medicine destroy my life than something else make my day. But then again, that might just be my Prozac speaking. ■