

To Open Minds...

“What does Psychiatry mean to you as a medical student?” Evonne Koh and Denyse Lee were asked this question by A/Prof Daniel Fung, Chairman, Medical Board, at the Institute of Mental Health, when they were enquiring about opportunities to undergo a short attachment in Psychiatry. A/Prof Fung agreed to their request readily but also asked if they could pen something on Psychiatry. Evonne and Denyse, who are from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, share their thoughts about a subject they have yet to experience first-hand.

A/Prof Daniel Fung – DF: What does Psychiatry mean to you as a medical student?

Denyse Lee – DL: Psychiatry to me is being a doctor to the powerful human mind. Albert Einstein once said, “The most powerful thing on the planet is not money, not gold, not even power itself, but the human mind.” He even compared the human mind to an inquisitive child wandering through a vast library trying to grasp at its books, all written in different tongues, in different languages, fragments of all the mysteries of the universe. Each book teaches and imprints those images into the mind’s eye and from there, allows the mind to conceive ideas, to create notions, to paint castles on clouds, to draw on life’s canvas. Some of the most majestic structures ever conceptualised were once products of human minds. Psychiatry actually deals with how the mind functions, what gets its gears running, and the problems that cause the mind to break down. More importantly, Psychiatry tries to fix it. It does not just carry theories on paper; it brings these theories to life and uses them for troubleshooting.

DF: What do you know about mental health and mental disorders?

DL: I have to admit, as a medical student still struggling with medical jargons new to me and learning as much of generalised human ailments as possible, job scopes of the different fields of Medicine become more hazy and the amount of knowledge we have about the details of what specialists, like psychiatrists, does leave much to be desired. For what it’s worth, I appreciate the complexity of the job. The vastness of the different mental demons plaguing each age group and various socioeconomic classes, already demand Psychiatry to be further subdivided into different categories and divisions that tackle specific problems.

Evonne Koh – EK: Mental health is part of a person’s well-being. It is intricately linked to the physical, social and emotional aspects of an individual. From my experience regarding management of mental disorders, such as epilepsy, medications form a major part of the treatment. Most of the time, these medications are taken for life and one can only hope the first medication that is taken works. For some, where the medication does not ease the condition, choosing the appropriate medication for an individual is a challenge.

DF: What is the job of a psychiatrist?

DL: Psychiatry, in itself, is a noble field of Medicine because it delves into the prison of the mind – the darkest places in one’s soul that would be considered taboo, a perfect conversation stopper. And the most frightening revelation about mental illnesses would be the fact that they are insidious. Mental illnesses are never flashed on placards stuck to a person’s forehead. Most of the time, people may not even know they have one. Even admitting that one has a mental illness carries with it a stigma, leading to problems with job finding, problems with normal day-to-day interaction, problems with facing the world or enjoying



L to R: A/Prof Daniel Fung, Evonne Koh and Denyse Lee

life the way it was meant to be enjoyed. This vehement denial and fear of seeking treatment, yet ironically living their lives in fear is an absolute tragedy in itself and psychiatrists do have to handle these challenges in their job.

EK: Mental disorders are real. They are illnesses that have to be managed and can actually be treated. Thus, there is a great need for psychiatrists to reduce the morbidity and mortality that these mental disorders can result in. Psychiatrists are like detectives who help to ascertain when a trait becomes an ailment or when a person's quirk is actually an actual illness that requires medical attention. The fact that mental health is closely linked to other aspects of a person means that the job of a psychiatrist also involves working in a team, consulting with primary care providers, social workers and even clinical psychologists. These factors make Psychiatry a complex specialty that only a certain group of people are drawn to.

DF: Are you attracted to the discipline of Psychiatry?

DL: Psychiatry fascinates me, because the human mind does. The mind is a beautiful and vast ocean of secrets waiting to be unlocked. Till this day, no one can fully comprehend the workings of the brain, that extreme complexity of the interaction between the mind and personal experiences, like what triggers one to love or what triggers one to kill. Or why certain pieces of music can heal the wounds that Medicine alone cannot. I remember reading a few years ago about Franklin D Roosevelt's famous quote: "Men are not prisoners of fate, but prisoners of their own minds." The nobility of Psychiatry then stems from unlocking these shackles, releasing the bolts and cutting the chains that hold a person hostage, giving one that freedom, that solace that words cannot describe.

EK: What is so interesting about Psychiatry is that each individual who suffers from mental disorders is different and have their different modes of presentation. The various ways in which they may present: from the subtle obsessive compulsive disorders where everything has to be done in a certain way, to problems with intellectual capabilities, intrigues me. Each patient is a new journey to experience.

DF: Do you know any psychiatrists personally?

DL and EK: We do not know any psychiatrists personally but we would date psychiatrists or encourage our boyfriends to be psychiatrists as our impression of them is that they are more sensitive and better acquainted with the psyches of people so they are good at handling emotionally charged issues. Furthermore, they tend to be more analytical, which will be a plus point in any relationship. **SMA**