

My First Day as a Doctor *By Dr Daniel Fung*

Having experienced fatherhood for the fifth time during my year-long fellowship in Toronto, I have been reminiscing about the first time we had a baby. That was 8 years ago, 9 months after our marriage (our friends often teased us about the dates but I can assure our gentle readers that this is absolutely true). Looking at our little bundle of joy reminded me how important it was to love the newborn. In my work, I am constantly reminding parents that their primary role is that of nurturing the child so that they will feel good about themselves, and that the purpose of education is to cultivate a healthy sense of self-esteem.

Interestingly, that thought made me think of my first day as a houseman. It may have been more than 10 years ago but it seemed crystal clear in my memory. Perhaps I was stupid. Perhaps I was just desperate to drive. My driving test was scheduled for my first day at work. So I bravely strode up to my boss with a request to be allowed to take the test in the afternoon by leaving a little early. I was attached to the medical department at a major general hospital in Singapore and my boss was Professor T, a prominent physician. I (being of slightly below average IQ) was naively unaware of his temperament and thought the request was a reasonable one. He must have formed an instant impression of me that very moment but he half-grudgingly accepted my request. The day went by quickly. It

was hectic and being green, everything seemed foreign and strange. Fortunately, I had the benefit of working with an older and wiser colleague. But the endless blood-taking and several admissions kept me on my toes and tired me out physically. Before long, I had to leave for my driving test. The result was predictable. I was tired and my senses were dulled. This was my third driving test and having neither the physical attributes nor brains of the fairer sex, I was clearly setting myself up for yet another failure. True to form, I made an automatic failure move by turning right from the left lane (where the markings on the floor were for turning left). Disappointed and hurt (with no car to drive for another few months), I looked at my watch and realized that it was only 5 pm. Deciding to return to work to “make up” for the extra hours I took off, I decided to return to the ward. This was to summarize some case sheets the nurses had earlier gleefully handed me as I was about to leave for my test. I managed to complete a few of the thick wad of notes when a nurse rushed into the room and exclaimed, “Dr T is making a round, he is looking for the houseman to accompany him!” I looked at my watch, realizing that it was 6 pm and wondering if I really should do this or to hide in the office. After all, isn't my work done? My sense of responsibility seized me (or perhaps it was my stupidity or some rare form of epilepsy?). A new case had been admitted at the same time. It was a Caucasian who had been in

Indonesia. She was feverish, pancytopenic and looked exhausted. A blood film done at the Emergency department revealed malarial parasites. What was to follow left me with a sense of humiliation that has been with me till this day. I was taking notes while following Dr T. He took a brief history and we adjourned to the nurses' station. As if remembering my unforgivable request (on the first day of housemanship), he started quizzing me on the treatment of blackwater fever and the medications I would use. I honestly didn't know at that point. This was when things got ugly. Dr T started asking me which University I had graduated from and what right I had of graduating if I did not know something as basic as the treatment of malaria. Suffice to say: by the time the episode was over, my miserable day was complete. I dare say that it made me shrink away from Internal Medicine as a potential specialty to pursue and filled me with a sense of inferiority that only now I have been able to address.

Like a child, the first experience for a doctor needs to be one that lifts the spirit, not crush it. The hardest part of parenting is being able to let the young child learn without holding its hand and not pulling it too hard so that it feels pain and will not try anything new again. For those of us taking a young doctor through his paces, do so gently and remember we are nurturing someone who we hope will develop the milk of human kindness in their work. ■