

# A Wonderful Journey into Medicine

By Dr Anne Tan Kendrick

**M**y perspective of women in medicine is coloured by my experiences, both in Singapore and abroad, from the 70s to the present.

As a younger child born to parents who were both doctors, I was very familiar with the antiseptic smells associated with clinics, and the respect and friendships that came with helping to cure the sick. It seemed very nice.

I attended an all-girls school, Methodist Girls' School, and at that time, it was an either-or choice of the Arts or Science stream. By and large, the "clever" girls went into Science, and the "havoc" girls into Arts. I guess I was not havoc enough. My father also died from liver cancer just before my 'O' Levels. So, I dutifully took to the books and made it into Medicine.

## THE WONDER YEARS IN CAMBRIDGE

After my 'A' Levels, I was accepted into Cambridge University to read the pre-med Tripos, archaeology and anthropology. Most of my Anglo Chinese Junior College classmates, as well as my older brother, Ian, were in the local medical school. I joined them for two months, before leaving for the UK where the term started in October. I was actually unaware at that time that there was a quota for women in Medicine, but was given behind-the-scenes advice that the girls should answer "I am not getting married" when asked by the National University of Singapore's (NUS) selection board if we would be; or suffer the indignity of the next question on whether we would give up medicine for the family. I did recall thinking at that time that the interviewers had to be monsters to trap innocent girls with tacky tricks like that.

We were in the first experimental batch of the Vocational Assessment Scheme, which schemed to put the "yuck" factor into potential medical students, by getting us to empty bedpans and urinals, clear up vomit, wipe up drool and such like, as unpaid assistants to nurses



Dr Tan with her three bundles of joy.

in the in-patient wards of the old hospitals. My mates-in-waste were a tall strapping guardsman, Seng Yew, and a slim, shy and bespectacled young man, Paul. I remember the experience and canteen fondly. As young women, our gentlemanly classmates treated us very nicely (maybe they were trying to impress us), but we were expected to do the same work. It was a lot of fun.

I left for a cold and grey Cambridge in the autumn of 1982, and missed the comfort zone and my Singaporean friends terribly. The British boys were initially unapproachable and aloof, but I gradually learned that they were mostly scared of saying the wrong thing, especially to a foreign female. Besides new relationships, I had to launch myself into the self-taught, highly experimental crash course in F&B management, housekeeping, getting around, and the wonderful art of peregrination, that is, exploring the countryside. The seasons were a sartorial challenge, viz. what to wear for different climates, environments, teas, tutorials, funky parties and May Balls, while keeping to a student's budget – it was a wonderful experience!

I was impressed with the confidence of my fellow medics. They were articulate, brilliant and funny in many different ways. Practically all of them were top students from their respective schools. It was a daily lesson in humility, and a superb opportunity to learn as much as I could from whomever, wherever, whatever and whenever. It also made me question my identity, and see myself in their eyes – hopefully, a worthy and somewhat exotic female specimen from the East (I was the only Chinese girl in my clinical class). I was determined not to let my country down. Besides, I was a Singaporean girl with a certain reputation (read: scholar) to uphold – yikes!

Being away from home opened my senses to the zeitgeist. If Australopithecus could come down from the trees five million years ago to explore the opportunities on foot, so could I, and so did millions of human beings.

**About the author:**  
Dr Anne Tan Kendrick,  
BM BCh(Oxon)(1988),  
FRCR(UK), MA(Cantab),  
FAMS, was Head of  
Paediatric Radiology at  
KK Women's and Children's  
Hospital from 1998-2004,  
and is President of  
the Association of  
Women Doctors.

◀ Page 4 – A Wonderful Journey into Medicine

During our first year as clinical students, we were aware that we had to compete to get choice postings in our final year, as that would be a springboard for applying for good housejobs the following year. We also had to leave town to clock-up interesting electives. Stuff like sports, art and dancing in the annual pantomime were just as important as being useful and likable on the ward rounds. The world was our oyster.

### JUGGLING ROLES BACK HOME

After qualifying from clinical school at Oxford, and completing my surgical house jobs at the Nuffield Department of Surgery, I returned home. It was initially with the intention of training as an ophthalmologist under the renowned tutelage of Professor Arthur Lim, having written somewhat fulfilling essays on preventing blindness as a medical student. With much soul searching after a lovely time in the eye department, I decided that I was not the type of person who could focus on diseased eyes all day. I preferred a specialty where I could step back and take in the whole picture. I then chose radiology partly because I sensed a good gut feel for picking up diseases from imaging.

Traineeship was a challenging time in Singapore. Besides work and swotting for exams, which included obscure questions on cathode rays, transistors and proton precessions, it was also the time for most of us to find a mate, settle down, buy that first car, update our looks, and generally come of age. It was a juggle that women, through the ages, still perform.

After a decent share of dating, I tied the knot as a radiology registrar in NUS, and started my family. My first son was born in Toronto, when I was working at the Hospital for Sick Children, and the younger two boys in Singapore. It was an exciting time at work, making new friends and setting up the Paediatric Radiology Service at the revamped Kandang Kerbau Hospital (now KK Women's and Children's Hospital), and getting involved with women's issues through the Association of Women Doctors (AWD).

### NEW CHALLENGES

Through my dear friends, Kanwaljit Soin, Yeoh Swee Choo and Lucy Ooi, I learnt that gender discrimination was still practised in 21<sup>st</sup> century Singapore, and was staggered. Before I knew it, I succeeded Lucy in the AWD presidency and whole-heartedly joined the lobby calling for meritocracy in the admission of females to the NUS medical school, and for equal citizenship rights to Singaporean women. We succeeded and the government removed these barriers last year and is actually interested in wooing the next generation to get romantic and have more babies! Amazing... these 180-degree turns... you never know till you try and try again.

“I'd like to see more Singaporeans live life to the full with no regrets ... be brave, endure some hardship for the right reasons, stand up for their principles and focus their energies on health and happiness.”

The recent drop in fertility rate is a manifestation of the new challenges that young women face, potentially as a career woman, wife, mother, daughter-in-law, tutor, chauffeur, domestic goddess, social being, and many things else. The workplace here has also changed, for better or worse. Sometimes, it may seem that a doctor's role in alleviating suffering is less important than management issues. We need to re-focus on quality care, respect and well-being for the individual, if we want to make Singapore a deserving medical hub.

Finally, human beings are four-dimensional and unique, and life is this one big opportunity. I'd like to see more Singaporeans live life to the full with no regrets, (within the bounds of decency and morality of course), be brave, endure some hardship for the right reasons, stand up for their principles and focus their energies on health and happiness. At the risk of sounding like an aunty, I truly believe it is the ultimate aphrodisiac! ■



*Dr Tan competing in the New Balance Aquathlon Challenge 2004.*