

Sleepless in Florida – A Houseman's Tale

By Dr Jenny Lim



Dr Jenny Lim (front row, fifth from left) with the residents of St Vincent's Hospital.

Greetings from sunny Northeast Florida, where the summer weather now is hot and humid, much like in Singapore.

Jacksonville is one of the fastest growing cities in the US, but still has a small town feel to it. While not exactly a hip place, it has hosted major concerts by Eric Clapton, Van Halen, Shania Twain, and yes, even Barry Manilow. Jacksonville's greatest coup is to be host to the Super Bowl next January.

St Vincent's Hospital is a 528-bed Catholic-run community hospital beautifully situated along the picturesque St John's

River, which leads into the Atlantic ocean. St Vincent's health system is faith-based and not-for-profit, and was founded by the Daughters of Charity in 1916. On 15 July this year, the hospital was honoured with a visit from Mrs Laura Bush to raise awareness about women and heart disease. It was like a scene from a movie to see her secret service entourage and black SUVs scattered about the main hospital entrance and side street, which was suddenly busy with repairmen and road sweepers that one did not see before. Some workmen were probably the real McCoy's as they beautified the streets for the First Lady's visit. Snipers could be made out on the rooftops and helicopters heard buzzing around. It made for an exciting day.

MELTING POT

The family medicine residency programme lasts three years and has 10 residents each year. It is a nurturing programme and the faculty members take great pains to minimise the stress of internship. Teaching is a top priority and there is great emphasis on evidence-based medicine. All first year residents are given a PDA, and US\$800 each year to purchase medical books and tools, or online medical website subscriptions.

The residents in my programme come from an interesting variety of backgrounds, quite representative of the melting pot that is America. Take my class for example. Reza, of Turkish-Persian parentage, is a 45-year-old who studied nuclear physics in Iran. He arrived in America 20 years ago with hardly anything, and became a nurse before deciding to enter medical school in the Dominican Republic in 1995.



St Vincent's Hospital by St John's River.

About the author:
Dr Jenny Lim (MBBS, 1988) graduated from NUS and practised as a GP locum for many years. While scuba diving in Australia, she met a commercial airline pilot from America, married him and moved to the US four years ago. She had a great time as a housewife enjoying her flying privileges, but decided to start working again. She considered alternative careers to no avail. So, she is now in Jacksonville, Florida, as a first year houseman at the ripe young age of 39.

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Bipin hails from India and worked in Colorado in a research facility for five years before getting into this residency programme. Tanya is from Toronto. Her parents are of German descent and she graduated from Hanover, Germany, where medical school is free. Ben is one quarter Chinese and the rest Filipino. He was born in America, lives in Orlando, and graduated from medical school in Manila where medical school is affordable.

I spent the month of June in orientation before residency started in July. There are many things I need to learn, such as the American language, which is not quite English. For example, I was giving directions to a classmate over my cell phone, asking him to meet us at the hospital car park. My paediatric chief (third year resident) noticed that my usual demure voice was rising as I yelled "car park" for the umpteenth time, thinking we had a poor phone connection. He came over and said: "Garage, Jenny, garage," which my American classmate Jorge understood immediately. Say hand phone over here and they will think you are referring to the cordless home phone and not the mobile cell phone. Ask the receptionist to photostat a document and you will draw a blank stare. They know what an elevator is, but not a lift. I recently discovered a new American dialect while clerking an African American lady. It made me wish for a Hokkien-speaking *Ah Soh* from whom to take a history. An American doctor with a Singlish-speaking heartlander patient would probably feel the same way I did – severe frustration – but I am slowly picking up the lingo.

SUPER-SIZED PATIENTS AND APPLE SAUCE

It has been an interesting five weeks of residency so far with much to adjust to, like super-sized patients. My very first patient seen during my first ER call was the fattest

person I have ever seen. She was a 528 lb 5'4" black lady who was only 32 years old. Lying on the bed in the ER room, she looked like an alpha male elephant seal basking in the sun on a beach in Patagonia. After the initial revulsion and disbelief, however, I felt sorry for the sweet-faced, good-natured person who is literally trapped in an armour of blubber. Doing a physical exam was a challenge and an eye-opener. One cannot imagine how the skin can stretch to accommodate the excessive amount of fat. I tried doing a vaginal exam but gave up – there were just too many rolls of fat to battle with, and Arnold Schwarzenegger I am not.

The next patient was a 57-year-old 410 lb 5'11" white man who seemed creepy to me. I discovered later that he was a convicted paedophile who is listed in the sex offender website. It was disturbing to see him again at the Family Medicine Centre recently, accompanying his young African American wife and her nine-month-old baby on a well-baby check.

On a lighter note, I saw a patient with diverticulitis, who when asked if she was adding fibre to her diet with fruits, said vehemently: "Yes, I have apple sauce for dinner."

SUMMER BREEZE

I have just completed a five-week paediatric rotation. This being summer time, and with routine vaccinations against hemophilus influenza, varicella zoster and pneumococcus, our admissions of sick children and babies were very low. This was a welcome breather as I eased into the vastly different US system with tons of paperwork to complete, and became acquainted with the various medical insurance companies and their different rules and coverage.

It will be a long three years, but it will be another interesting chapter in the life of Jenny Lim – one can only hope. ■

HURRICANE BONNIE AND CHARLEY

Many were disappointed that the hurricane following Bonnie was not named Clyde. Somebody screwed up big time as can be attested to by the unhappy letters to the network news last weekend.

In Jacksonville on 13 August 2004, there was much trepidation as we hunkered down in anticipation of the second tropical storm within two days. Well, at least most of Jacksonville's residents did, with the exception of the one Singaporean who wondered what the fuss was about, never having experienced a natural disaster in her life before. Many at St Vincent's were glued to the news on TV or over the internet finding out the latest path of Hurricane Charley and most were anxious to be home before the bridges were closed if the winds hit 50 miles an hour. For me, home is a four-minute walk from the hospital and there was no danger of being stranded. There was a run on milk and bottled water at the supermarkets as people prepared for the worst. I realised that things could have turned out badly when I received a call from my travelling husband at 6 am, asking if I was still alive. He was berated for waking me up, but had Charley hit us the way it did Punta Gorda, it could have been me hiding in the closet as he had instructed me to the night before. As such, I slept right through the hurricane and thanked God nothing had changed as I walked to work that Saturday morning.