

Charming Cambridge

By Ms Sim Yirong



I was very excited when I first set foot on Cambridge, a University town, four years ago. It was a dream come true to enter this mystical realm of tradition and academia. In this land of contrasts, it is fascinating to study in a historic medieval town filled with Gothic-styled buildings and libraries situated side by side with high street shops and bops (our slang for night clubs). There are high-tech science parks and ancient cobbles, as well as bustling streets and tranquil green spaces. It is not uncommon to see academics in their flowing gowns walking or even cycling beside street punks.

WHERE GENIUS TREADS

Maybe it is this blend of town and gown that makes Cambridge renowned – producing at least 80 Nobel Prize winners, about 70 of whom were students here. Since 1908, affiliates of this University have won in every category – 22 in Medicine alone. Famous Nobel Laureates include Sir Charles Sherrington (neuron functions); Sir Hans Krebs (citric acid cycle); Frederick Sanger (the first person to win two Nobel prizes for Chemistry – for the structure of the insulin molecule, and discovering how to determine the information encoded in DNA-DNA sequencing); the infamous Francis Crick, James Watson and Maurice Wilkins (DNA structure); Alan Hodgkin and Andrew Huxley (transmission of impulses along a nerve fibre); and John Sulston and Sydney Brenner (discoveries concerning genetic regulation of organ development and programmed cell death), just to name a few. Other famous Cantabrigians include John Harvard (founder of Harvard University); William Harvey (discovered the mechanism of blood circulation in

his celebrated treatise “De motu cordis et sanguinis in animalibus” – On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals); Cesar Milstein (monoclonal antibodies); Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton, Stephen Hawking and, much closer to home, our dear Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Being in the presence of such genius can be quite intimidating, yet I am also profoundly inspired whenever I walk along the streets that these great scientists once trod, and whenever I enter the Eagle Pub (where Watson and Crick supposedly first announced the discovery of the structure of DNA), or sit by the Newton tree.

THE MAKING OF A DOCTOR

The teaching of Medicine at the University of Cambridge dates back to 1540 when Henry VIII endowed the University's first Professorship of Physics, Dr John Blyth. However, for more than 300 years, only one or two medical students were registered each year. Although Anatomy had been taught since the early 18th century, with Pathology and Physiology following in the 19th century, it was not until the appointment of Dr John Haviland, Regius Professor of Physics (1817-1851) that consideration was given to the formal teaching of undergraduates.

It was only in 1842 that George Paget, the famous physician, then in his third year at Addenbrooke's Hospital, pioneered bedside examinations. These were the first ever to be carried out in UK hospitals and became an integral part of the Bachelor of Medicine finals. Over time, the medical curriculum has evolved, such that research in the ever-expanding field

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Sepia memories: Christ's College Medical Society 2001.

of biomedical science currently provides the stimulus for much of the clinical school's core activity, with patient-centred learning remaining the heart of modern medical education.

In my first two years as an undergraduate, I was taught basic medical sciences, such as Anatomy, Biochemistry, Experimental Psychology, Genetics, Pathology, Pharmacology and Physiology. Lectures were conducted for the approximately 280-strong intake of medical students (of which 20 are fellow non-EU overseas students) and veterinary medics. Practical sessions were carried out in smaller groups, and reinforced in supervisions with our college tutors in groups of two to three students. Without any quota on the male-female ratio, it is perhaps interesting to note that females form the majority of the medical school intake.



Getting frosty at King's College: Yirong and an unidentified snowman.

In addition, there was also a clinical strand, Preparing for Patients, where we were given opportunities to perform interviews, pay home visits, and follow up pregnant patients for a few months before and after delivery. In the third year, all medical students would then pursue a course of their interest to attain a BA degree. The options are limitless, ranging from lab research (like the natural scientists), medical ethics and law to engineering and management sciences.

After graduating with a BA degree, I was given the chance to continue my education (MB BChir) in the clinical school at the University of Cambridge. While about half the medical students leave Cambridge at this point to pursue their clinical training in either Oxford or London, I stayed on because I wanted to embark on the MB/PhD Programme (and because I love Cambridge).

During the clinical medical training, we are based mainly in Addenbrookes Hospital, which is also the national and regional centre for cancer services, organ transplantation, neurosciences and genetics. Alongside our clinical training, there are eight vertical strands integrated with teaching throughout – clinical pharmacology; comprehensive clinical methods; medical ethics and law; palliative care; pathological sciences; practical clinical skills; patients, population and society (health economics and public health); and radiology. We are also intermittently posted out to the various district hospitals in East Anglia, such as Papworth, Hinchingbrooke, Bedford, Peterborough, West Suffolk, Great Yarmouth, Ipswich, Luton, King's Lynn and Whipp's Cross, for more exposure and experience.

HARRY POTTER AND MAY BALLS

At this halfway point in my lengthy medical training (eight years for the MB/PhD Programme), I am still enjoying my life as a student. Because of the collegiate system (the university consists of 31 colleges), I find it easier to interact with other

non-medical students in my college. Dinners in hall are usually spiced with the flavours of history, engineering, science, law and political sciences. Contrary to popular belief, discussing your cadaver Ed does not always end dinner conversations with a deadly silence.

There are plenty of sports clubs and societies to be involved in, which makes university life even more exciting and enriching. I enjoyed playing badminton for my college and singing in my college choir. There are many other sports clubs for the fit and active, including the popular boat club (especially the annual boat race between Cambridge and Oxford), and various societies to cater to everyone's interests. Interesting ones include the Wine Tasting Society, the Tiddlywinks Club, Pooh Society, Tolkien Society, Harry Potter Society and Scrabble Club, just to name a few. There are also many ethnic, religious and cultural societies set up by the many international students for the cosmopolitan population. The Singapore and Malaysian communities in Cambridge are also quite strong and active, evident through the various events organised by CUMSA (Cambridge University Malaysian and Singaporean Association), CUMAS (Cambridge University Malaysian Society) and CCCF (Cambridge Chinese Christian Fellowship). Given that there are only about two to three medical students from Singapore each year, with slightly more Malaysians, we are quite a close-knit community.

Social gatherings usually revolve around food, be it a casual cook-out to dining in a formal hall (formal three-course college dinners where gowns are usually required – similar to Harry Potter's dining hall, but without the floating candles). In the summer, when the weather is nicer, and when the burden of tripos (our examinations are known as

"tripos" after the three-legged stools used by BA candidates in the Middle Ages) is lifted, the celebratory mood is evident in the various garden parties and College May Balls. Held peculiarly in June, May Balls are black-tie events organised by students for their fellow peers. It is a yearly affair, where the formality of a ball is enjoyed with friends, music, food, drinks and fireworks. They are fun and festive events, lasting from evening till the next morning. I guess they are also good preparation for future night shifts!

Another favourite summer event is punting (a sort of rowing which is propelled and steered by a long pole). The river Cam, which runs through the city centre, is a very popular spot for this activity. It might not be the most efficient means of transportation, but it is a great way to have fun and relax, with champagne and strawberries to whet the appetite, and good company to stimulate the senses.

What I love about Cambridge is how the countryside is situated close by, with pleasant walking and cycling routes from the city centre to villages like Coton and Madingley, as well as along the river to the pubs and Orchard Tea Gardens at Grantchester. Having grown up in urban Singapore, I never fail to be delighted when I encounter cows, horses, squirrels, hedgehogs, deer and foxes, even in the city. It is amazing how such modernisation can coexist with nature, and in such harmony.

In a town where time seems to stand still, four years in Cambridge have flown by very quickly. I feel that I have learnt a lot, not just in terms of academia and medicine as a profession, but also about British culture and myself. There is so much more to learn, and the quest for knowledge will continue as I enjoy the next four years as a student in beautiful and enchanting Cambridge, and life beyond. ■