

Desperate Housemen & Medical Drama in the Last 100 Years

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The SMA News is privileged to share in the celebration of 100 years of medical education in Singapore. The Singapore medical school has come a long way since it first took up space in a former female lunatic asylum at Sepoy Lines.

In this and following issues of the SMA News in 2005, we will look back at some of the important medical topics that have been published in the last decades in the newsletter. We have invited either the very same writers to reflect on their own articles penned those many years back, or present-day opinion leaders to comment on these historical papers. In this centennial year, we will also feature leaders in Medicine both in Singapore and internationally. In this July issue, we are honoured to get up close and personal with Dame Carol Black, President of the Royal College of Physicians of London, United Kingdom (See page 22). The SMA News is also keen to hear from our future doctors – that is, the voice of the medical student.

Just like the mobile, bell-ringing Singapore ice-cream man who has resurfaced selling his raspberry ripple, sweet corn, "atap chee" and durian ice-cream blocks with wafer biscuits or sweetbread, medical traditions and memories are also worth preserving. A common thread of experience that runs through the streams of consciousness of all doctors since time immemorial is the houseman year. For sheer surreal stories of stamina, sweat, struggle, sleeplessness, suffering, survival, soul-searching, some suicides and "siong" calls without suppers, we need look no further than the life and times of desperate housemen. This intense rite of passage as a houseman must surely bring back bittersweet memories for all medical doctors. Like desperate housewives, housemen through the years have commonly felt undervalued, underpaid, undernourished, underwater and overworked. But conditions for junior doctors have improved through the years.

I was disturbed to read in the 16 June 2005 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine an article entitled "Taking their own lives – the high rate of physician suicide".

This article reported an analysis of 25 studies revealing that the suicide rate among male doctors was 40% higher than the general male population, and that the suicide rate among female doctors was 130% higher than the general female population. On 7 July 2005, while having tea with a fellow medical doctor, I learned that several bombs had detonated in central London. One of these bombs blew up a bus outside the British Medical Association (BMA) in Tavistock Square, splattering innocent blood all over the front walls of the BMA House. My conversation colleague's wife was in central London at the time and he

was frantically attempting to contact her. Since then, this indomitable city has been blitzed again by more terrorist incendiary. It is a sad irony that the doctors who had taken their own lives might have felt that they had failed themselves and their healing profession, burdened by a profound sense of inadequacy or failure in delivering ideal care to the sick and dying. Conversely, suicide bombers have taken not only their own lives but those of innocent men, women and children, spurred by a perverse ideology quite alien to the Hippocratic Oath.

The words of Harvard surgeon and writer, Dr Atul Gawande, remains a timeless reflection for all doctors:

"Graduates, we are the ones who must become comfortable with being uncomfortable – and it is so that others may be comforted."

– Dr Atul Gawande's 2004 Commencement Address at Yale University School of Medicine

And what will Medicine be like in the next 100 years? It may well be that the bench and the bedside will become one and the same, as we now savour the dawn of personalised medicine.

In the words of that inimitable American icon and baseball player, Yogi Berra:

"It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future." ■

Photo credit: Dr Clinton Chan

