



# HOW COVID-19 SHAPED ME

Text and photos by Carissa Ng

I remember feeling the immediate relief at my desk when the Australian government approved my travel exemption application on the seventh attempt. It was a Saturday night, 31 October 2020.

It had been seven months of online learning in Singapore since the Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged us to return home due to the global surge of COVID-19 cases. We had to return home to Singapore then – my 18-month-old daughter Hannah and husband Xavier did not own long-term visas, and Xavier had to salvage the crumbs of his businesses that fed multiple mouths and supported his brother's dentistry school fees in Adelaide. Yet, with the good news lugged along an inevitable dilemma: "What about Hannah?" No one knew

when the borders would open again and how long we would be separated for.

Fast forward two months, I was sobbing on the phone during my video call with Xavier. It was a Friday afternoon, 11 December 2020, a month away from home. Hannah was not coping well with the separation, and although Xavier reassuringly gave me the option to stay put in Brisbane and commence my third year of medical school, his tired eyes said otherwise. Torn between the weight of two desires – motherhood and medicine – I chose the former and deferred the first semester of my clinical year.

Undeniably, I struggled to grapple with my circumstances – offshore online learning strips away clinical exposure,

and provides minimal guidance from teaching sites and inadequate faculty support. Clinical year students are expected to be competent in their patient communication, physical examinations, clinical reasoning and skills – areas which I was once proficient and confident in. I had gradually spiralled into self-doubt and unpreparedness due to the lack of patient contact time. Furthermore, receiving daily updates from my cohort mates on their clinical rotations back in Brisbane via social media platforms brutally reopened old wounds.

Yet, with all that said and lamented, they were just opportunities to wallow in self-pity. Circumstances before me, while indeed uncomfortable with a bitter aftertaste, were temporary. How would I bend around them and not break? How would I still be grateful despite the setback?

## Keep knocking on doors

Dissatisfied with the outcome of deferment, I wrote to several doctors and points of contact for clinical attachments, appealing to them for clinical placements. Private hospitals were sympathetic but hesitant, public hospitals and polyclinics were regretfully declining my appeal. I was fully aware of the tight safety regulations and protocols affecting clinical attachments. In addition, I was fully cognisant of the "international medical student" emblem that I carry – it was irrefutable that I was not a priority among the many local medical students whose clinical postings were temporarily suspended. But I wanted to exhaust all possible alternatives before resigning to my fate.

Deferment to me carried several repercussions, mainly the financial implications on my husband and father. Since COVID-19 hit, my father's salary that supported the bulk of my tuition fees was slashed by half. I remember him informing me apologetically that he might not have sufficient funds to cover my rent in Brisbane. Xavier's event planning businesses had to cease till further notice. He too was faced with tremendous stress in paying for our daily



needs, his family in Singapore and his brother's tuition fees. The repercussions were too great to accept deferment readily; I was willing to go a hundred miles to prevent that.

### Don't cry, do something

Since November 2020, I assisted Xavier as he opened a waffle and gelato café called Burnt Cones here in Singapore, which thankfully sustained us financially during the pandemic. We subsequently decided to expand the business with our second outlet called Up In Smoke, which was launched in July.

Academically, deferment has undoubtedly put a halt to my student life and pace, and it requires a great amount of self-discipline to keep up with clinical matters. Furthermore, the implausible reality of local clinical attachments limits the opportunity for hands-on practice and clinical exposure. That said, I am taking this time to revisit clinical content and practicals, attend Zoom lectures on different specialties and am slowly (but surely!) determined to complete my question bank!

### Learning motherhood

I cried throughout my flight back to Singapore, simply because medicine had a special place in my heart. I was reluctant to leave the place that built my dream, but back at home, my daughter was crying for me. I knew it was (and still is) the best decision to make – to make motherhood my utmost priority.

In the book *Risen Motherhood*, Laura Wifler wrote: "God uses the inconveniences and disruptions from our children to shape and form us, not just as mothers, but as women of God. In each interruption we have the opportunity to choose: will we trust God, or will we trust ourselves? Will we say not just with our mouths but with our actions, 'Yes, Lord, I will trust you with my time, my comforts and my desires?'"

Hannah used to watch me leave for school by 8 am, only to be back at 6 pm to put her to bed. During weekends, she would find me buried in books or my laptop for hours. Pre-clinical years were hard-going and it further added to the mom-guilt of not witnessing her milestones. The deferment became my blessing in disguise – spending time with Hannah and watching her grow into a little girl with big dreams were invaluable memories impossible to be traded for.

### Passionate, resilient and hopeful

Looking back, I dare not credit my achievements as solely mine, for behind me stood mentors who advised and guided me through medical school. Throughout my plight in this pandemic, they assisted me while I navigated through uncharted waters, making bold requests to complete my clinical attachments

locally and prevent further deferment. When I needed my appeal to be heard effectively, they referred me to appropriate channels and amplified my voice. They had my best interests at heart, knew my constraints and gave me the confidence that I was not alone.

The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed rudely barged in and caused unprecedented disruptions in my medical education, and laden me with financial and family constraints. Sometimes, the worst moments in our lives make us come out stronger than our former days. The pandemic has forced me to challenge my beliefs and principles, and make uncomfortable yet wise decisions. It has also revealed the compassionate side of the medical community where several doctors have stepped in and made my dark days brighter. This pandemic might have tasted like a bitter pill, but its blessed effects of resilience, hope and courage will see me through in my life as a doctor, wife and mother. ♦

#### Legend

1. Family photo at Burnt Cones
2. Treats you can get at Up In Smoke
3. Hannah and I

Carissa is a third-year medical student undertaking a four-year MD programme at the University of Queensland, Brisbane. Carissa and her husband Xavier have a two-year-old daughter and own two gelato cafés – Burnt Cones and Up In Smoke.

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