

# MAINTAINING AN INTERNATIONAL FRATERNITY

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At the height of the pandemic in March 2020, there was widespread uncertainty about the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its effects. Many international students returned to their families and the comfort of home. Doing so stemmed from a multitude of reasons. Other than assuring the safety of loved ones by being close by during such times of need, going home also meant financial liberation from hefty rental costs. The global lockdown led to an all-online curriculum for pre-clinical medical students, and there was therefore little difference in staying or returning home with regard to academic learning. Adding on to the fact that being in the same time zone as friends and significant others helps improve online social connections, returning home definitely seemed like an extremely attractive option.

## Doing our part to help

The Singapore Medical Society of Australia and New Zealand (SMSANZ) quickly noted this large-scale repatriation phenomenon and aptly responded. Mid-year events had to be shifted online or postponed, networking and other social events were cancelled, and there was an increasing need to come up with events to supplement clinical education for our members due to the lost clinical exposure. There was also a need for plans to assist members in returning to Australia whenever it became possible.

We tapped on our relations with Australia and New Zealand member

schools' societies, established ongoing communication with them and worked out how best we could support each society in helping their members, as per the circumstances for each school. Some had upcoming pilot programmes and others had census dates for return. There were even those who needed placements in Singapore or risked deferral. We surveyed the demographics and circumstances of returning members, linked member societies up with local resources where needed (for placements, research, enrichment, etc), prepared guides for border exemption applications, came up with an SMSANZ supporting letter and monitored their application progress. Our support letter was individualised for every student and was also given earlier this year to 2021 freshmen and those who planned to but have yet to return to their country of study. We continue to regularly update our members on the COVID-19 situation in both Australia and Singapore as well as any news on international students and their ability to return for their medical studies and placements.

Compared to last year, 2021 has so far been relatively smoother sailing. We continue to plan an array of events to enrich our members. This includes more robust language and dialect programmes, with online delivery as the mainstay, which have since expanded to offer sign language, and our new networking event "Coffee Conversations" which seeks to bring together like-

minded students and Singapore doctors in sharing their experiences over a meal.

On top of organising events to support the unprecedented return of many medical students, SMSANZ quickly recognised the need to play a role in helping tackle Singapore's then worsening COVID-19 situation, and engaged those who returned to help. Confident that our student members are always ready to learn and assist with the pandemic's needs, we readily advocated for job postings and opportunities that supported Singapore's fight against COVID-19. Many of the jobs and volunteering opportunities gave our members the ability to strengthen their communication skills with patients while having the chance to learn medical procedures (eg, giving an intramuscular injection) as COVID-19 swabbers, vaccinators and more.

## Collaborating with SMA

SMA has played a strong supporting role in the running of SMSANZ in the past years. Traditionally, SMA has worked with us to understand how our members can better transition and adapt to the Singapore system when they return from overseas. This included surveys for our alumni and recent graduates regarding difficulties and challenges they faced after experiencing the transition, as well as advising us on our alumni programme. With the foundation set by the previous SMSANZ committees and SMA, we have officially launched our mentorship

programme recently, connecting our students to both past Australian and New Zealand graduates and/or other interested mentors. Our inaugural programme hopes to build long-lasting relationships between mentors and mentees, and provide an opportunity for our members to learn from their predecessors.

In recent years, SMA extended their student memberships to all overseas Singaporean students, which has been a great initiative in helping our students stay updated on events and the local medical scene via the monthly *SMA News*. A survey was conducted for new student members on how they hoped SMA could assist them, and this certainly allowed members to get the most out of their memberships. SMSANZ also attended the recent SMA Doctors-in-Training Committee meeting, which provided us a safe channel to voice our concerns and issues with regard to overseas graduates.

SMA has also been supportive of our events and initiatives. This year, they graciously allowed us to use their conference room to distribute our merchandise to SMSANZ members, while we routed members to their recruitment drive for SMA student memberships. SMA had also offered to provide venues for our “Objective Structured Clinical Examination Practice Sessions” event that was due to happen in April this year

but had unfortunately been postponed due to the COVID-19 circumstances surrounding Tan Tock Seng Hospital at the time. The event was created in a bid to supplement clinical teaching for our members due to the lost curriculum time. We are looking to hold it in small groups as soon as the pandemic situation permits, so do join us as mentors for the sessions if you're keen (publicity materials will be out in due time)!

### A worthwhile partnership

Through SMA, SMSANZ has managed to better communicate and collaborate with local medical school student societies in the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, Duke-NUS Medical School and the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKC Medicine), which have opened up many opportunities for members, including teachings, events and even conferences. Several of our executive committee members were also invited to visit the LKC Medicine campus where we had a meeting to discuss future collaborations, as well as venue usage for any future events.

While the COVID-19 situation may persist for a while, SMSANZ has never been more determined to continue advocating for our members and to provide bigger and better opportunities in the coming years. Our partnership with SMA will certainly allow us to take leaps in the development of our society. ♦

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### Legend

1. An SMSANZ member (left) volunteering at a vaccination centre

