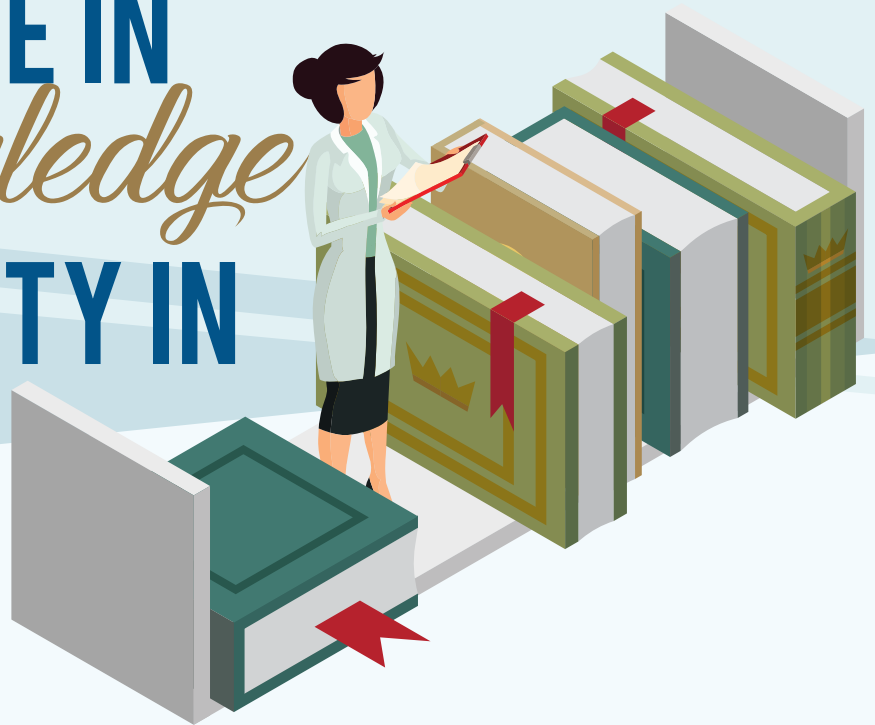


NOT PRIDE IN *Knowledge* BUT HUMILITY IN *Wisdom*



— Text and photos by Dr Celeste Ann Chua —

2018 will always be a special year as it marked the completion of a long journey and the beginning of a much anticipated one. 2018 is the year I cleared my exit exams... 16 years after graduating from medical school.

Like most aspiring medical school graduates, I aimed to enter specialist training soon after the completion of my housemanship. But the best-laid plans often go awry – I met my better half. When he also wanted to pursue surgical traineeship, I had to ask myself what the things closest to my heart were.

I decided that while I had always dreamed of being a surgeon, it was more important to me that I built a home and family with the man that had captured my heart. I wanted to be actively involved in bringing up our children and I did not want him to worry during the trying years of his basic and advanced specialist training.

I then tried other postings to discover what my other interests were. There was nothing to fear as I had made my decision and what I had to do was to make the best of the situation.

My journey as a GP

I finally decided on family medicine as I enjoyed being able to treat patients in the community and see them as they

were, not clothed in hospital attire and vulnerable in an artificial environment. I enjoyed the breadth of family medicine; treating infants and the elderly, the spread of conditions that had to be dealt with, vaccinations, chronic diseases, acute illnesses and trauma... there was truly never a boring day.

I initially pursued a Masters in Family Medicine but subsequently decided to do the Graduate Diploma in Family Medicine (GDFM) instead as I felt that I would benefit more from the way the programme was structured. I was blessed to rotate through general surgery, anaesthesia, internal medicine, paediatric medicine, emergency medicine and geriatric medicine before entering the polyclinics.

After obtaining my GDFM, I continued to work in the polyclinics for a few years before moving out to work as a private GP. The practice of primary healthcare in the polyclinics and by private GPs was different and took a little getting used to. Medications used were different, there were no nurses to administer injections for you or to do diabetes or asthma counselling, and there were no laboratory or X-ray services available within the same building. However, I found private GP work satisfying as I could see a regular group of patients, many of whom subsequently brought

their children, spouses and even parents back to the clinic when the need arose.

My venture into private healthcare was also at the point when my husband was busy amid his advanced specialist training years. This arrangement worked to our advantage as it afforded me flexibility in my time, a healthy pay and the ability to spend time with our young children, and be home at night to hold the fort.

It was in my private GP years that I had my second and third child. After the birth of my third child, it came the time for my husband to embark on his health manpower development plan (HMDP) stint in Cambridge. Hence, I resigned from my job and followed him.

Settling down in Cambridge

The one and a half years in Cambridge were not easy for me initially as I felt socially isolated. It was difficult to transit from being a career woman to a full-time stay-at-home-mum. Even though we had family visiting us, it was not easy assimilating into the different culture and making new friends. It took a while for us to settle down and find our feet, and for the children to get used to the school system.

Things turned out well in the end and we enjoyed our time in Cambridge.



We grew closer as a family during our time there and made some good friends with whom we still keep in touch. The children also remember the little things we did like how we would play in the park in summer or how I would cycle home with them in a trailer behind me.

Answering my lifelong call

My time in Cambridge also afforded me the time to re-evaluate what I wanted to do with my life.

I still felt the call to pursue my dreams of becoming a surgeon. But that would mean having to re-enter the system, take a definite pay cut, face a lack of sleep and less time with my family. I weighed the pros and cons. My parents and in-laws were retiring – they were fit and keen to help out with the children. I was not getting any younger but I knew that I could still push myself. I decided that since I only get one go in life, I should live with no regrets.

Thus, while in Cambridge, I sat for my MRCS examinations. My mum flew over in the last month prior to the examinations to help me with the household chores. I still had to take care of the children but at least I did not have to worry about cooking. I would often be studying in the laundry room using the ironing board as a makeshift desk, surrounded by my books.

When we returned from my husband's HMDP, I was blessed to secure a rotation with Singapore General Hospital's ENT Department. Subsequently, I was accepted into the SingHealth ENT Residency Programme.



Initially, I had some concerns about how I was going to “fit in” with the younger crowd as some residents were more than ten years my junior! (But I have to thank my younger friends for keeping me young at heart.)

Life as a resident

The residency years were challenging. I felt the physical strain when manpower was short or the calls were bad. I saw how the other residents, who were younger and single, had so much more energy to devote to research and study. Compared to them, I felt like I was constantly fighting a losing battle. I just did not have the energy that they had.

However, I soon came to realise that everyone is at a different place in life and there is no “perfect” time. There will always be social obligations and duties outside of work, but life goes on. And while I struggled, time was a great equaliser. I accepted that I would never be as brilliant as some of my residency mates, but with time I would only get better if I continued to work hard.

Take that leap of faith

Looking back, I have to say that I have no regrets making the decision to pursue my dreams. Being given the opportunity to train was a privilege. It was not always easy but it has been an enriching journey.

I have to thank my husband who has been my steadfast supporter and pillar of strength; my ENT family: seniors who guided me and encouraged me, my peers and juniors who consistently tried

to keep me updated on “current” trends and inspired me with their drive and resourcefulness; and last but not least, my patients who have made the practice of medicine worthwhile.

As I mature as a clinician, I see more and more truth in the words we used to see on our National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine's car decals – “Not Pride in Knowledge but Humility in Wisdom”. To those undecided on which career path to choose or whether to take that leap of faith, my advice would be: You only live once. Follow your heart. If you never try, you will never know. Don't be afraid to chase your dreams – some things are worth fighting for. ♦

Legend

1. Treasured moments with the family on a holiday trip abroad
2. A simple celebration with the family. We are often hard pressed to find time for the ones we love amid the time pressures of training and work. However, without their love and support, we would not be where and who we are today

Dr Chua is a recently exited otolaryngologist based in Sengkang General Hospital. She is still trying to balance work commitments and family time. She believes that amid our hectic schedules, there is still a place for a smile and a gentle word for our patients and colleagues.