



Thriving

POST-COVID-19

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

High with happiness

There is much to rejoice about, in this month of April. Forgive me if I seem rather exuberant (and frivolous) in my next few paragraphs for I am giddy with joy!

First and foremost – the lifting of Rostered Routine Testing for the healthcare sector from 21 March 2022, communicated via a Ministry of Health (MOH) circular. Readers of my column will know my deep phobia of the nasal swab, and friends will know the significant impact the swabs had on my life and work. I welcome with great relief the revised Safe Management Measures, with its simplification and rationalisation,¹ even though actual implementation still seems to cause confusion.

It is also wonderful to be able to dine out in groups of ten (*although I am still unable to understand the magic behind the groups of two, five and eight!*) Has anyone else encountered business practices instilling their own permutations though? Such as admitting a group of ten diners, but seating them

in two tables of five. Perhaps it is well that I have further transited to a Chaotic Good (reference my March 2022 column at <https://bit.ly/5403-PF>), and have ceased to let any variation bother me.

The exemption of mask-wearing for outdoor areas is great, but the definition of outdoor versus indoor areas can be a bit difficult to understand. Void decks and retail block walkways are outdoors, but the coffee shop is indoors. Akin to the classification of a whale as a mammal instead of a fish: it takes a learned person. The common local definition for indoor space is now “anything with a clearly defined entrance and exit”,² but this includes hawker centres and coffee shops. How odd it is – the hawker centres I go to are open on all sides with no fixed entrance. My primary one son announced that his teacher had taught him that anything with a roof is indoors, but this does not explain void decks and covered walkways. Oh well, Chaotic Good prevails. Personally, wearing a mask has become a way of life for me...

Remarkably, alcohol sales and consumption after 10.30 pm have also resumed. What could this mean? Will diners stay out later, until (*gasp*) 11 pm and drink until they vomit in the streets? Will people remember that being vaccinated does not protect you from getting drunk? Will people still count correctly when drunk?

Coming back to Earth

Turning to humour is one of the ways we cope with stress. Witty, sharp comments that make one laugh in surprise and think a little; that is why jokes are so enduring, and it also explains why meme pages are so popular. However, the humour should not be demeaning or bullying. Even as we joke about the changing local regulations, we must not forget the very serious consequences of COVID-19 which has infected 494 million people worldwide and resulted in 6.17 million deaths (statistics as of 8 April 2022).³

In Singapore, we have had 1,290 deaths, as at the time of writing this

column.⁴ That's 1,290 families who have lost a loved one, and countless other relatives, friends and colleagues who have known someone who died from this infection. Words are not enough to convey the loss and grief.

We may never know its full impact on mental health – the people who have been living with chronic anxiety and fear over getting infected, and what may happen to them. In my practice, I have met women with chronic anxiety and fear over breast cancer. Now many of them are also worried about COVID-19 – not just for themselves, but for their children and family as well. Those who have contracted COVID-19 recall their stress in those weeks, where some were stranded overseas, and some are now suffering post-infective chronic coughs or shortness of breath.

I am also not spared from chronic worrying. But my not-so-secret power is the ability to “cold-heartedly” compartmentalise every problem. Classify, put aside, organise every matter in my mind clearly, direct them to the next working step, and then take it from there. Also to separate the personal from the professional; issues that stem from within versus issues that are external.

Otherwise, how else would I be able to do all these, week after week? It has been a non-stop juggling of commitments, and I just have to hope that when things are dropped, nothing breaks, and learn to simply pass on tasks to someone else to take over for a while. Family commitments to my young kids and sick elderly; SMA matters such as private healthcare insurance, junior doctors' welfare, staffing and morale; financial considerations in managing a private practice; and personal concerns over health and relationships – that is just covering what is on my mind broadly.

Who heals the healer?

I have had patients who saw me once for a breastfeeding problem with their first child, only having to come back for review much later with their second child as they were able to self-manage the problem previously. Likewise, those

of us who are staying reasonably well have figured out our own self-care,⁶ and support system. I have a great husband who is an amazing partner, supporting all my endeavours and caring for the family when I need help. The SMA Council members⁷ and the Secretariat staff⁸ who have stuck together through thick and thin, battling personal challenges in health and loss of family members, form part of my support system as well.

Kudos to Krysanía, the Chief Administrator who started work with the SMA right around the start of COVID-19, and got thrown into the chaos of having to keep the organisation together to support our Members as best as we can, while putting up with me, always giving them new projects and ideas to work on. Sze Yong for his steady support for Council meetings, and for my Nominated Member of Parliament representation. Seth, in heading a good Membership team comprising Liena, Rita and Priseillia. Li Li and Jasmine, who manage the business and partnership developments. Sarah and Alina in putting together the monthly *Singapore Medical Journal*, and Sylvia and Daryl for this newsletter! Denise, with Spencer and Jayanthi in continuing courses and workshops for our Members.

Big thanks as well to Angeline and Priscilla for keeping SMA's finances healthy, to Gek Eng for her long-standing management in human resource, and to Sarah, Athirah and Sharon in handling professional indemnity matters. Kie Chuan and Ashley in the technology department – thank you for the wonderful website revamp! Ronnie, Dominic and Sara from SMA Charity Fund in their efforts to make supporting our needy students possible. While we hope to finally be able to resume the SMA Annual Dinner later this year, and I can deliver a speech and formally thank everyone, I will have to settle for this, for now! (Do watch out for further updates on the Annual Dinner in the next few months!)

There is strength in numbers; also, we get stronger when we reach out

and help others.⁹ While this may run the risk of one being taken for granted, most times, the rewards are intangible. Develop the art of knowing when to ask for help versus when to render help. Conversely, one also needs to say “no” to unwanted help, or to say “no” when one is unable to help.

As we step into a post-COVID-19 endemic world, I hope that we all find our own balance and thrive.¹⁰ ♦

This column was written before the announcement of the eased COVID-19 rules announced on 22 April 2022.

References

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Dr Tan is a mother to three kids, wife to a surgeon; a daughter and a daughter-in-law. She trained as a general surgeon, and entered private practice in mid-2019, focusing on breast surgery. She treasures her friends and wishes to have more time for her diverse interests: cooking, eating, music, drawing, writing, photography and comedy.

