



A Helping Hand and a Listening Ear – SMA HO Helpline

Text by Dr Ivan Low, Chairperson, SMA Doctors-in-Training Committee

In our medical community, all of us struggle through difficult transitions: from school to university; from pre-clinical to clinical; from National Service to hospital (for male doctors); from resident to senior resident, and so on. Undoubtedly, one of the most challenging transitions is house officer (HO) training, a one-year training phase that seeks to build people up for independent medical practice but, in the process, breaks many people down.

Beyond the festivities, Christmas has always been a pensive period for me. There's something about the season of giving that makes me re-evaluate what more we could do for those in need, in particular our HOs. This was how my fiancée and I began to conceptualise what we now termed the SMA HO Helpline (formerly the SMA HOSP+ Helpline), the latest addition to our slew of initiatives for Post-Graduate Year 1 (PGY1) doctors,¹ which we launched on 25 December 2021.

As a start, we wanted the Helpline to be able to direct HOs to various resources they might find useful, such as the SMA HO Handbook, the SMC Handbook on Medical Ethics, whistleblowing channels and crisis hotlines. We also wanted to provide broad guidance for potentially sensitive matters, such as what to do after a medical error occurs, how to manage sexual harassment at the workplace, and whether physical or mental health conditions need to be declared.

It quickly became apparent that the issues HOs faced were numerous and varied, and that some matters would require more in-depth, contextualised guidance. So we included an open-ended "talk to someone" feature in the Telegram chatbot, through which HOs could have a safe space to share their concerns and thoughts with an SMA volunteer. Throughout these interactions, we strive to keep our commitment to confidentiality.

At the time of this writing, the SMA HO Helpline has seen more than 450 "clicks" over six months, and feedback from users has been encouraging thus far. With strong support from the designated institutional officials and hospital PGY1 directors, the Helpline has been incorporated into HO orientation programmes in all institutions. We hope that it has been helpful to our fellow junior doctors, and we look forward to working with you to upgrade it further!

Please feel free to check out the SMA HO Helpline on Telegram by searching @smahospbot or visiting t.me/smahospbot. ♦

Note

1. SMA has published the House Officer (HO) Handbook since the 1990s, and started a Called To See Patient (CTSP) workshop for HOs in 2019.

About Us

The SMA Doctors-in-Training (DIT) Committee advocates for junior doctors and medical students, and runs a wide range of initiatives to support them in becoming competent, confident and compassionate healthcare professionals.

The Committee has in the past spoken up about on-call allowances, leave for NS call-ups, and the float system. More recently, we have been providing recommendations on key issues such as working hour caps, post-graduate training opportunities and junior doctor engagement.

On top of this, the Committee operates a HO Helpline, publishes regular updates of the HO Handbook, conducts workshops for junior doctors, and co-organises the SMA National Medical Students' Convention.

If you would like to find out more about SMA DIT efforts or join our cause, please write in to ilj@sma.org.sg. As a HO or a senior, keep in the loop of our latest HO support programme initiatives at our Telegram channel @helpourHOs. Visit <https://bit.ly/SMA-DIT> for more information on the DIT Committee.

Dr Low is a Navy medical officer and A&E resident. He is the SMA Council's youngest member, and has a passion for public health, community outreach and medical education. In his spare time, he can be found relaxing at the park with his loved ones, his dog, and a cup of kopi c peng (siew siew dai).

