

The Bucket List

Text by Dr Ng Chee Kwan

As 2023 draws to a close, I have started to take stock of the significant events of the year and what I have achieved. It is also time to plan for the year-end family holiday trip.

This year, we have decided to travel to Canada for a winter holiday. My rationale for making this long trip was based on sentimental reasons, as well as it being an opportunity to cross off a so-called "bucket list" item. My wife and I had spent an entire year in Canada between 2004 and 2005, when I undertook my urology fellowship in London, Ontario. We had just gotten married a few months before that, and we thoroughly enjoyed our time there. We experienced the warm hospitality of the Canadian people. We were also privileged to experience the four seasons and had the opportunity to witness the grandeur and beauty of the country during our breaks from work. We have not visited Canada since and thought we would want our children to experience this vast and wonderful country.

We will be spending most of our time in Vancouver and Toronto, but we will also make a side trip to Whitehorse, about 1,500 km north of Vancouver. At 60 degrees latitude, it is within the ideal zone for viewing the northern lights, or aurora borealis. It has always been an aspiration of mine to see the dancing waves of the northern light, and seeing the northern lights seems to be on many people's travel bucket lists as well.¹

The term "bucket list" refers to a person's goals and dreams for the future – things the person wants to achieve within his/her lifetime. To be honest, I do not have a definite bucket list. It was only when planning for the Canada trip that I thought to myself, "Since I will be there, why not make a bit of effort to view the aurora?"

A bucket list can be beneficial as it helps motivate us to set life goals. On the other hand, they could cause regret if the bucket list items are not achieved. Curiously, from a physician's perspective, asking patients about their bucket lists may help us in managing our patients.

A study published in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine* found that among 3,056 participants, around 91.2% had bucket lists.² Six primary themes were identified from the participants' bucket lists: the desire to travel (78.5%), the desire to accomplish a personal goal (78.3%), the desire to achieve specific life milestones (51%), the desire to spend quality time with friends and family (16.7%), the desire to achieve financial stability (24.3%), and the desire to do a daring activity (15%).

The authors proposed that the bucket list is a simple framework that can be used to help patients make informed healthcare decisions and weigh treatment options based on the potential impact on their life goals. This could be relevant especially for patients with chronic or terminal illnesses.

I can identify with the six primary themes of this survey. I do think that finding out more about our patients' life goals would help establish rapport and may also help our patients make decisions regarding their treatment.

With that, I wish everyone a wonderful holiday season and a fulfilling year ahead. ♦

References

1. Sabin L. Northern Lights tops list of UK travellers' dream bucket list sights. *The Independent* [Internet]. 30 September 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/472TEGC>.
2. Periyakoil VS, Neri E, Kraemer H. Common Items on a Bucket List. *J Palliat Med* 2018; 21(5):652-8.

Dr Ng is a urologist in private practice and current President of the SMA. He has two teenage sons whom he hopes will grow much taller than him. He has probably collected too many watches for his own good.

