

Looking Back at the Year

Text and photo by Melanie Chee and Karen Lee

Marking the end of the 2023/2024 academic year, this special edition of "Letters from the UK" features correspondence between Melanie and Karen, both fourth-year medical students and members of the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom (SMSUK) from different universities and cities in the UK, as they look back at the year in reminiscence.

Letter 1: The Year in Review

Dear Karen,

How has it already been a month since we last met in London for the SMSUK Annual Dinner? On one hand, it feels like time has really dragged on, as though it's been three years packed into one, yet it was as if I had blinked and time just flew by. Suddenly, we're nearing the end of the year – bizarre!

I cannot believe how much has happened in the past year. Academically, Year 4 has been demanding as we rotated through the specialties (ie, neurology, ENT, ophthalmology, dermatology, geriatrics, paediatrics, O&G, psychiatry and oncology). There was so much content to cover and so much to see on placement, it was incredibly fast paced. Most times, I had barely gotten used to a new specialty when suddenly, it was time to rotate to the next one. And when we were placed at district hospitals in smaller towns, not only did we have to get used to new specialties, we also had to adapt to completely new living environments!

At times, I would think about the confidence I've gained over the last four years. Taking histories from patients and approaching doctors and nurses in the wards (the unfortunate ones who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, caught in the crossfire of a confused medical student looking for someone who looks free enough to entertain questions). It's crazy how these are now ordinary parts of my day – pre-medical school Mel could never!

How have you been navigating this whirlwind of a year? Catch me up on everything that's been happening on your end!

Warmest regards,
Mel

Letter 2: The Challenges We Faced

Dearest Mel,

I've missed you! :) I have definitely found this year to be the toughest thus far and share such similar sentiments! Having to switch mindsets between different specialties has been really demanding, both academically and mentally. With each passing year, the responsibilities and expectations placed on medical students seem to grow exponentially and I find myself following suit.

This year, I stepped out of my comfort zone and decided to partake in more extracurricular activities and research opportunities, as well as student societies. It was a real struggle trying to simultaneously juggle revision, multiple commitments and still maintain a social life. Oftentimes, I questioned my capabilities and felt disappointed for falling short of the goals I had set for myself. Thankfully, I have since learnt how to organise my time better. This includes completing all my tasks, while equally dedicating downtime for my hobbies and loved ones!

Such hardships have highlighted the importance of having a support system. The saying "no man is an island" resonated with me a lot this year. I am extremely blessed to have been able to rely on loved ones, both near and far, for support. SMSUK, in particular, has been a "home away from home", providing a sense of comfort and familiarity amid the flurry of medical school.

Who (or what) brings you comfort these days?

Kind wishes,
Karen

Letter 3: The People We Lean On

Dear Karen,

Seems like Year 4 has really been pushing both of us to our limits! Despite being in different universities and cities, it's reassuring to know we've been navigating similar challenges.

After a long day at the hospital (spent anxiously avoiding being an inconvenience), hours poring over drug side-effects, and the stepwise management of endless lists of conditions, sometimes all we crave is a hug or the comfort of a home-cooked meal. Some relief from the frigid cold of poorly insulated student housing would also be very welcome! Unfortunately, such simple pleasures are quite out of reach for us international students. While technology has definitely made keeping in touch easier, it's not nearly a comparable replacement.

That is why having a support system close by is so important. Without friends to rely on here, the tough days would be so much harder to power through. And while I've been fortunate to have found comfort and camaraderie in many different groups, there's always a special place in my heart for my fellow homesick Singaporeans.

In Leicester, a much smaller city than London, there aren't many of us from Singapore, which is why the SMSUK community has been so valuable in helping me stay connected to home. I am so grateful for the opportunities to meet like-minded individuals who have now become my very close friends – yourself included, of course! I really don't know how I would have had the resilience to persevere or to thoroughly enjoy my time in the UK, had I not found our little community!

You've definitely had more experience than me, having been in the UK much longer! How do you usually deal with homesickness?

All my love,
Mel



Letter 4: The Future Awaits

Dearest Mel,

I can definitely vouch that homesickness comes in waves and many forms. One thing I have come to realise over my six years spent abroad is that "home" is more of a feeling rather than a location to drop a pin on.

Be it the familiarity of placing your favourite bubble tea order, or getting screamed at by hawkers you frequent, there's something nostalgic about falling back on a routine. Admittedly, it was tough finding that in a foreign land, particularly when life's seasons are quite literally passing us by – it is easy to get swept up in the chaos of it all. Having "constants" to ground me, in the form of hobbies or friends, has been imperative to my journey of both academic and personal growth.

While reflecting on our progress is key, it is equally valuable to ponder our future. This week marks the end of my fourth year. Honestly, I've been having mixed sentiments towards this last stretch. On one hand, I can't wait to put an end to the homesickness and distance between loved ones back in Singapore and myself, but on the other, some part of me almost feels like I'm trading one "home" for another.

However, if there's anything this degree has taught me, it's to pay homage to the strength of the human spirit. Whatever struggles we may be powering through right now will unite us and one day, be fond memories we grow from and look back on. Our future being "unknown" has always been somewhat daunting to me, but with each passing year I find more things to hold near and dear. Our little community has been such a beacon of hope throughout the past year – knowing I'll be working alongside such motivated and enthusiastic peers in the future has been incredibly encouraging and makes me excited thinking about what the future holds!

Here's to walking this path together!

With love always,
Karen ♦



Karen and Melanie in Porto, Portugal

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