

Shared Odysseys

Text by Shayna Walia and Christic Moral

Members of the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom (SMSUK) have seen the passing of another year. It has been such a unique opportunity to be on the committee overseeing events to serve such a close-knit community. As young students granted the grace of pursuing medical careers overseas, our people have become our greatest asset. Personally, I admire how each one gives time to lay important groundwork in fostering such long-lasting friendships, with undercurrents unseen yet alive, lasting us years into the future. Our deep connections have drawn us from all over England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for the brave attempt in recreating the *kampung* spirit wherever we can. Standing at the end of the academic year, we celebrate 30 years of our identities, following slightly behind our Little Red Dot.

Amid my reminiscence, I have struck up a conversation with one of our members, Christic, to gain perspective of his exciting plans and his memorable year.



Christic and his father in London

Shayna is a medical student at Cardiff University and the outgoing editor of SMSUK.



Christic is a medical student at King's College London and the incoming editor of SMSUK.



Hey Christic, this is an interesting way of communicating, not by text or email, but through a unique, albeit publicised, exchange of letters! Looking back at the last year, what is one memory that you are reminiscing most about?

– Shayna

It has been such an eventful year, Shayna. I am hard-pressed to choose just one memory to talk about. Between being a fresher in London, meeting people from around the world and returning to academics, I have so many stories to tell. My dad's visit to London in March, however, was my chance to show him a little about the life I have built here and fittingly, it is also the memory I have chosen to share.

Half a year of disjointed schedules amid a seven- or eight-hour time difference had turned daily interactions with my family into a series of missed calls. Rare calls were also almost entirely consumed by my mother's ever-growing list of worries and my reassurances in return. It would still be another three months before I would go back home for summer and see my family, but in the meantime, my father visited me in London for two days following his business trip. I picked him up from the train station, half-expecting an emotional reunion of some sorts. It was not too long into our conversation that he expressed the urgency of getting my mum's homemade pickles refrigerated in time, which I thought defeated the point of pickling. Even though it was a little absurd, it was so characteristic of my family that I also found it rather endearing. We spent the rest of the day at all the typical tourist attractions, as it was my dad's first time in London, ending the night with a long walk along River Thames.

Funnily enough, we chose to stay in for the second day, and I did not make any further progress on showing him around London. Cancelling plans and staying at home was on-brand for us after all. The next morning, I sent him off at the train station. On my Tube ride home, I reflected on my dad's visit, and how I had changed as a person over the past half a year, and worried if things would be different between me and my loved ones. My dad's visit may not have been as glamorous or momentous as I had expected, but I realised that my growth did not take away from the connections I had built. With all the excitement of new experiences, I had forgotten the feeling of comfort I had grown familiar with back home in Singapore. I was reminded of the relationships I have built with my friends and family, and how important they were in keeping me grounded.

– Christic

That sounds amazing, to have had such a connection with your dad that reminded you of home. It is indeed in the simplest interactions where we can find the most comfort and strength to last us through the long days. Being in a foreign environment has made me develop a greater appreciation for my upbringing, especially when I am pushed out of my comfort zone.

I remember being taught about the use of pharmaceuticals both within the National Health Service (NHS) and outside regulation. This part of introducing us to the realities of the medical profession worked in tandem with our teaching in mental health. In my first year, we visited supervised injection facilities (SIF) where we learnt that people who use intravenous drugs (PUID) can safely use them with medical help and support present. This concept of SIFs was jarring at first, then deeply humbling and sobering. We learnt about community support and services, as well as culture, education and medical support, all of which had roles in rehabilitation and preventive medicine for PUIDs. I have found myself more grateful for this opportunity of an education, which I would not have otherwise attained had I studied medicine in Singapore, and I was grateful for the perspective that this education brought me. In your opinion, what is a key event in your medical education that has stuck with you this year? Why has it made an impact on you?

– Shayna

One of the defining moments in my medical education happened just one week into the start of the school term, when I experienced my first dissection. It was a sobering moment, and a stark shift from learning anatomy through neatly drawn diagrams. Following a briefing by our school's chaplaincy team and anatomy lecturer, we took some time to reflect and opened the lid, unveiling our donor's body. As we undid the final layers of plastic sheets wrapping the cadaver, I found myself unable to name how I was feeling. Between the excitement that hands-on learning brought and the gravity of the situation, I could not settle on feeling just one emotion or thinking one thought. Dissection is a sensory experience, and so I instead focused on the smell of formaldehyde, the feeling of dissecting skin, and the view of complex and confusing structures of the human body, all of which are missing in cleaned-up textbook diagrams. Human anatomy is messy and unpredictable, and I learnt to navigate this with care and precision, never forgetting our donors' contributions. Being able to learn anatomy through cadaveric dissection and fully engaging myself in its process is something that I am undoubtedly grateful for.

– Christic

I remember my first dissection, and the feeling of being slightly overwhelmed by our donors and the smell of formaldehyde too. I think it is an unspoken rite of passage that every healthcare professional who attends an anatomy session will experience. Looking back at these memories, how do you feel about your year? And how does it differ from your outlook of the upcoming year? Being our next editor, of course, brings about excitement and, dare I say, nerves? I am truly excited for you as well, and the enrichment of such a position will grant much opportunity for you.

– Shayna



The outgoing 30th SMSUK committee members at the annual dinner

This year granted me so many new opportunities and experiences to develop myself as a person. I had the freedom to make my own decisions, but it challenged me and forced me to exercise responsibility in my choices. I have learnt more about myself, and what I value and believe in. I am surer of myself and excited to carry this forward into the next year. As for being the next editor, I am eager to push my boundaries and try something new. I have little previous experience, and that definitely brings some anxiety with it. However, if there is one thing I have learnt from this year, it is to push my boundaries and try new things, especially if they are out of my comfort zone.

– Christic

That sounds great! And on a lighter note, do you have any exciting summer plans lined up? For me, I am going to Vietnam in July with my family, and it will be a nice change of scenery and a time of reconnection with my siblings, as well as an abundance of coffee.

– Shayna

Honestly, none! I have kept off of making any plans for the summer. It has been a while since I have seen my friends, family and Singapore, and I want to experience things as they come. I am mostly looking forward to catching up with my loved ones and resting before returning for the next academic year!

– Christic

What a mindful reminder to take things slow and live in the moment! I hope that your summer break is filled with much-needed rest and reconsolidation, and I shall be trying to do the same. And to our SMA family, we hope that the coming months will herald renewal of the mind and body. Stay tuned for the work that our young Singaporeans do some ten thousand kilometres away from home! ♦

– Shayna