

What I Wish I Knew

Housemanship is a journey common to local doctors, but it has certainly seen its share of evolution over the years. In this article, three doctors of varying seniority share their thoughts on their housemanship and what they wish they knew in the early days of their journey.

Dr Elizabeth Teo, new house officer

That first day I stepped into the wards was filled with a mix of fear, anticipation and excitement. Bright-eyed, riding on the high of passing my Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery after what seemed like years of endless studying, and yet somehow I felt completely unprepared for the year ahead. The adjustment from medical school to house officer (HO) life is a big one – gone were the days of dozing off midway through a recorded lecture playing at double speed in the background.

Now, our words hold weight and our actions have real consequences. Working life comes with responsibilities, and unfortunately, such responsibility demands conscientiousness. It is a terrifying weight to bear but one we must learn to shoulder. Being a doctor is more than a nine to five – in fact, it is usually even longer than a five to nine – and our weekdays or public holidays are no longer our own. But even so, in the midst of busy calls and non-stop changes, one must stop to take a breath and remember why we chose this career in the first place. It is easy to lose yourself in the system, and burnout is so prevalent among junior doctors. So, despite the responsibilities of work and the inevitable adjustment disorder, you must protect your time and personal space. Before we can properly care for others, we have to learn to take care of ourselves and be intentional in finding joy in the little things in and out of work!

Dr Rajit Soni, new senior resident

1. Patients are our best teachers. It is hard to find the motivation to study and improve amid the demands of work, but I find it much easier to have that drive when there is a real patient whose management I am unsure of. Even if I lack time to read on the day itself, I take note of the questions I had on these patients and look into them with that specific patient in mind when I get the chance to. Over time, this helped me develop algorithms in my head for various situations.
2. Compassion matters. Work is tough, and burnout can happen. When it is hard to find meaning in work, what keeps me going is talking to patients. Hearing their stories, their anxieties and fears, and sometimes being able to relieve these concerns is a heartwarming feeling. Even when stretched for time, spending those five minutes with a patient who needs it gives me a fresh lease of motivation to get through the day.
3. Do not take things personally. As humans, we make mistakes. And as juniors, there will be times when a senior is upset with us, but that is often more related to their mood than our actions. I have noticed myself and colleagues to be unnecessarily curt on days we are stressed, swamped or poorly rested. We should all strive to be kinder to each other, but as a junior, it is often better for our mental health to avoid taking things personally.

Dr Joanna Chan, consultant

Firstly, remember that all patients assigned to the team are the whole team's responsibility. Counter-check to ensure that all actions and changes have been done for all patients by lunch and exits.

Secondly, allow yourself to be kind to patients. My worst experience during the plug-setting learning curve involved repeated attempts to insert a plug for intravenous Augmentin on call for a patient with difficult veins when, despite repeated SOS, my medical officer (MO) was too busy to help. The patient was stable and not septic. My current self would advise my then HO self to stop attempting after I failed twice, and escalate to another available MO. Sometimes as juniors, we think we need to get the job done "at all costs". We are right to question our judgement – sometimes the task is truly of paramount importance – but not all tasks are equal.

Lastly, do not struggle on your own with a sick patient or a difficult task – get senior help (as above). Ask another senior if one party does not respond. ♦

