

A Helping Hand

By Roland Xu



Roland (standing, fourth from left) with his medical schoolmates on attachment at Singapore General Hospital

Roland, who is currently studying at Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore, delivered a speech at the SMA Annual Dinner 2013. He shared how the bursary he received from the SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund, now part of the newly established SMA Charity Fund, gave him and his family a helping hand in his journey as a medical student. The following article is loosely based on the speech he gave.

I am Roland, a third year medical student. I would like to share my story and how the SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund has helped me in my pursuits.

I come from an average family of four, not very well off but we manage. My parents are both working, and I have a brother who is currently a third year student in Nanyang Technological University. Sounds pretty much like other families out there.

I guess the only difference is that both my parents were not as privileged as we are now. Both of them didn't get much education when they were young. Instead, in order to provide for their own families, my father and mother had to start working even before they became teenagers, and have never looked back since.

Today, my mother is still working as a cashier and my

father, a glass glazier. To be honest, I do not get to see them much. Most of the time, when I reach home at night, they are both not home yet. And in the morning, my father will usually be out of the house before I wake up. My brother and I grew up not being able to see much of our parents, let alone share our troubles and concerns with them.

I guess what breaks my heart the most is when I see my father come home with cuts all over his hands, as the nature of his work requires him to handle glass all the time. Some of the cuts are so deep that he has to go to the polyclinic to get them stitched up, and the very next day, he will be back at work again. My father also suffers from lower back pain which has persisted since his younger days, and his only remedy for that is the countless medicated plasters he has stocked up in his drawer.

Photos: Roland Xu

My mother also has her own medical conditions and they do not make her life as a cashier any easier.

Both my parents have contemplated retirement but they simply could not do so. For them, working is a necessary evil in order to provide for the family, especially since both their sons are still in university. There is not much of a choice.

Therefore, if you were to ask me how the SMA bursary has helped me, I will say that it has helped to lessen the financial burden of my education on the family, and for that, I cannot thank SMA enough. Furthermore, I think there is something that goes deeper than the financial assistance provided. The very fact that the bursary amount came from SMA goes to show that our seniors in the medical fraternity are willing to invest in the future of Medicine. They believe in the medical students and want to see us succeed in our endeavours as we strive to become the best doctors that we can be, which makes the bursary even more meaningful, especially knowing that you have seniors who are willing to be there to support and guide you along. That, to me, is a beautiful thing.

Last but not least, before I end, I would just like to share a bit about my personal experience of passing it on for others who are less privileged than me. I was lucky enough to have gone on one of the Overseas Community Involvement Project trips, which were highlighted in an article from the October 2012 issue of *SMA News* (see <http://goo.gl/4dxfd>). I was involved in Project Phetchabun, a biannual initiative to Phetchabun, Thailand, which some of you might have heard of. Our main aim was to help a group of locals, known as the Hmong, who were originally from Laos. They provided assistance to American troops during the Vietnam War. After the war, they were persecuted by the Laotian government for supporting the US, and were forced to flee to Thailand to seek refuge. Although the Hmong have lived in Thailand for a long time, the Thai government still refuses to grant them citizenship, and up till this day, they are still deprived of basic education and healthcare.

It was a humbling trip for me, as I managed to learn a lot more about Medicine and its true beauty. While we were in Phetchabun, we held clinics and house visits for those who were too sick to come for the clinics. When we were attending to the Hmong, we realised that we were greatly limited by the amount of resources we had. Furthermore, we couldn't prescribe medications to those who were suffering from chronic illnesses such as hypertension, as they were simply too poor to see the local doctors for any form of follow-up.

However, this did not dampen the Hmong people's spirits one bit. On the contrary, they continued to queue up at our doors and showed us such great gratitude which put us to shame. It was then that I realised they were both deeply happy and grateful just knowing that there are people out there who are truly concerned about them, and willing to sit down and listen to their stories.

This reminds me of the quote, "To cure sometimes, to relieve often, and to comfort always". As medical professionals, we often get lost in the myriad of wonder drugs and beautifully executed surgical procedures, that we tend to neglect the fact that in Medicine, perhaps the most wonderful thing that we can give to our patients might just be our time and undivided attention. **SMA**



Roland is a third year medical student from Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. He enjoys learning the art of Medicine, even though countless hours of sleep have been sacrificed. He serves in various local and overseas community service programmes (admittedly after trying to sleep in a little).



Roland (second from left) with his Orthopaedics tutor (first from left) and clinical group members