

Surviving a Locum Experience 101

By Dr Henry Chua

LOCUM, which is short for the Latin phrase *locum tenens*, literally means “placeholder”. So a locum doctor is basically one who fulfills the duties of a regular doctor when the latter is not available to carry out his work. Locums are extremely vital to the healthcare scene in Singapore. This band of versatile doctors are needed to run overnight shifts in 24-hour GP clinics, help with non-urgent cases in A&E departments, perform standby medical duties for sporting events, stand in for GPs on vacation, and the list goes on.

Entering locumhood can be exciting and yet daunting all at once for the uninitiated. I still remember my maiden locum experience years ago: I took eons to see my first patient presenting with a viral flu, just because there was such a wide variety of different cough and flu medications available in the GP clinic. As I tore fervently through the locum bible, otherwise known as the MIMS book, trying to make sense of all the different brands of cough medicines and dosages, my clinic assistant had to gently remind me that the last patient I saw had started to doze off in the reception area while waiting for me to prescribe his medications. At the end of the day, I survived my first ever locum experience, albeit with a lot of fumbling in the dark.

From that day onwards, I sought to perfect my craft as a locum, and would now like to share some advice on how to survive a locum experience.

Professionalism

- Be punctual for the appointed slot. If for any reason, you are unable to make it on time, do try to give the clinic staff a buzz so that they can inform the patients that the doctor is being held up.
- Do keep a lookout for any “locum file” which some GPs prepare for their respective locums. This usually gives you a detailed inventory of the drugs available in the clinic and any other specific instructions that the resident GP may want you to know.
- When you initially start working in a new clinic environment, do take time to familiarise yourself with its set-up and the IT system used to key in medical records. Feel free to ask the clinic assistants to give you a quick orientation of the clinic. The last thing you want to do is to flounder around looking for things in front of your patient, making you look amateurish.
- Self-discipline in continual learning is vital as a locum, so as to ensure best clinical practices in treating patients. Do regularly attend Continuing Medical Education programmes to keep up to date with latest medical advancements. If you are in doubt of the management of a patient during your consult, feel free to call your

colleagues in different specialties or the resident doctor to get a second opinion (not in the patient’s presence, of course).

- With the advent of technology, try downloading reference books and drug guides into your smartphone and tablet computer for easy portable referencing, should you stumble upon medical cases that you require some help with.

Administration and finances

- Ensure you keep an account of all the locum payments you receive, so that you can file taxes accurately.
- Check your locum payments (locum rates, mode of payment, and so on) with the clinic assistants or resident doctor prior to starting the locum slot, to avoid any financial disputes.
- Keep a diary of your locum slots as a constant reminder of your daily schedule. Being a full-time locum can sometimes be a confusing affair as you may find yourself at different clinics at different timings each day.
- Ensure that your medical malpractice insurance is valid with the Medical Protection Society. It is also important to obtain appropriate coverage for your scope of practice, especially if you intend to practise any aesthetic procedures.

Networking

- Locuming need not be a lonely affair. I find it useful to join networking websites, like LocumSg (<http://www.locumsg.com>) or SMA’s Locum Online (<http://sma.org.sg/membership/index.aspx?ID=121>), to source for locum slots or to read about other locums’ experiences.
- Take time to become well acquainted with the resident doctor and the clinic assistants. Most times, the clinic assistants are the ones planning the doctors’ roster. Getting to know them properly and gaining mutual trust will ensure that your services as a locum will be called upon should the need arise.

The abovementioned personal tips are by no means exhaustive, but serve as a good starting point for initiation into locum work. With that, I hope you enjoy a fruitful experience with locum work, and *happy locuming!* ■



Dr Henry Chua is currently a full-time locum and enjoys working at his own pace. Aside from work, his time is spent on playing catch with his toddler daughter, travelling and playing the guitar.