THE HEART OF FAMILY MEDICINE

SMA News speaks to six family doctors, currently practising in a variety of settings, to find out why they chose this profession, their experiences as primary care providers and what keeps them going.


Why did you choose to become one? It was a stroke of serendipity that led me to it. When I was still an anaesthesia trainee, my clinical group mate came by for lunch one day and asked me to help him out at his town practice. So there I went. One can appreciate the true measure of a job only during practice. Given the choice, would you want to be a doctor again? If yes, would you choose to be a family doctor again? Yes, I would certainly want to be a doctor again, but I might want to try working in another specialty to see what it is like.

Do you feel that you are earning a lot less than a specialist? Anecdotal examples suggest that some fields may be earning a lot, but I can only guess. I'd say that we are paid fairly for a decent day's work. What's the best thing about being a family doctor? Being a doctor presents one with many of lives' possibilities, whether one is practising in public or private, specialist or general practice. I like the many opportunities for direct interaction with patients and their families in general practice, by caring and helping to address their ideas, concerns and expectations. The breadth of the scope of work is indeed challenging. And the worst? With the rapidly ageing and growing population, the demand for healthcare services has grown increasingly. This load sometimes does negate the joy of being able to care for patients and engage with each of them in a more meaningful manner.

What's one wish you have for family doctors? To continue to do what we enjoy doing most – helping our patients and communities without fear or prejudices.

How long have you been a family doctor? Have been practising in primary care for the last seven years. Why did you choose to become one? Firstly, they are the doctors I always knew doctors to be since I was a kid. Secondly, unlike a physician who specialises in treating specific organs or age ranges, a family doctor takes care of you as you are.

Given the choice, would you want to be a doctor again? If yes, would you choose to be a family doctor again? Yes to both. Do you feel that you are earning a lot less than a specialist? It is what being a family doctor means that matters – the diversity, challenges and satisfaction.

What's the best thing about being a family doctor? Helping patients from all ages and all walks of life stay healthy – not just physically but often mentally and psychologically, in relation to their social backgrounds and environments. And the worst? Managing ill-tempered patients and family members with unrealistic expectations and demands of healthcare professionals. What is one wish you have for family doctors? To continue to do what we enjoy doing most – helping our patients and communities without fear or prejudices.
How long have you been a family doctor? Since 1998 after completing my bond with the Ministry of Health. Why did you choose to become one? I had considered Internal Medicine (IM) after housemanship. But in the course of doing my IM postings, I realised that hospital Medicine was not really suited for me. I chose to become a family doctor because it gives me the chance to interact with patients in the community rather than in a controlled hospital environment. Being a family doctor is also more holistic as the scope is wider and encompasses all major disciplines across all age groups. Given the choice, would you want to be a doctor again? If yes, would you choose to be a family doctor again? Yes to both. Do you feel that you are earning a lot less than a specialist? Definitely. The services of family doctors are highly undervalued in Singapore. Patients and employers are willing to pay high professional fees for specialist services but quibble over fees charged by family doctors. They do not appreciate the fact that rental and manpower make up a large proportion of family doctors’ practice costs as the doctor’s endeavour to deliver good and cost-effective primary care. What’s the best thing about being a family doctor? The ability to control and plan my work-life balance, and having the time to pursue my interest in music. As a full-time locum, I have the flexibility to choose my working hours and locations, and to take leave as and when I like to travel. And the worst? Managed healthcare and the corporatisation of Medicine have placed shackles on the style of practising. It can be frustrating when you are not able to apply evidence-based Medicine in treating patients because of limitations imposed by company contracts and managed care schemes. One can have vast knowledge and clinical experience but because of non-clinical constraints, patients sometimes are not optimally managed to the level that we desire. This can be demoralising. What’s one wish you have for family doctors? Many unpleasant incidents in the past have tarnished the image of family doctors in the eyes of the public. My wish for the family doctors’ fraternity is that we will continue to uphold the high ethical and moral standards expected of us and to which we have pledged to maintain when we became doctors. We should always bear in mind that whenever there is a conflict of interest between patients and other stakeholders like the employer and managed healthcare companies, the primary responsibility is to the patients. This should be our guiding principle.

Dr Au Kah Kay
Full-time family physician locum

Dr Goh Shu Huey
Currently practising in Frontier Healthcare Group

How long have you been a family doctor? 12 years. Why did you choose to become one? I enjoy the interaction and close relationships that family doctors can form with patients and their entire families, and the ability to treat them holistically. Given the choice, would you want to be a doctor again? If yes, would you choose to be a family doctor again? Yes. For the same reasons above. Do you feel that you are earning a lot less than a specialist? I think I am drawing a decent salary. I believe a specialist’s income also varies depending on what specialty he or she is in and hence there is no basis for comparison. What’s the best thing about being a family doctor? The privilege to provide care for a patient in a continuous fashion over an extended period of time, and the trust and rapport that builds up as a result. And the worst? The relatively longer hours of general practice as most of us run night clinics. What’s one wish you have for family doctors? That one day family doctors will be respected and recognised for their role in the healthcare system – as well-trained generalist primary care practitioners.
How long have you been a family doctor? For 3.5 years since leaving hospital practice in 2010. Why did you choose to become one? I really enjoyed my interactions with patients and their families while I was a junior medical officer, but in the hospital, the usual sequence is that patients get admitted, then discharged and I don’t really get to see them again after that. I felt that going into Family Medicine would enable me to build stronger bonds with my patients and contribute to the overall health of the entire family. Given the choice, would you want to be a doctor again? If yes, would you choose to be a family doctor again? Yes, definitely, I can’t think of myself being in any other profession, and yes I would choose to be a family doctor again. Do you feel that you are earning a lot less than a specialist? Haha, that’s a very loaded question. I think most of us who went into Medicine or Family Medicine, for that matter, weren’t really motivated by money but saw it as something we would enjoy doing. As Prof Low Cheng Hock always told us when we were medical students, “Do what you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.” What is the best thing about being a family doctor? As mentioned before, the special bonds and friendships you build with your patients are priceless. And the worst? Can’t think of any at the moment... What is one wish you have for family doctors? That Family Medicine can be more of a career aspiration for young budding doctors and students, rather than an afterthought or second choice. I sometimes meet medical students or students-to-be, and their first question to me is often, “Why did you not become a specialist?” rather than, “Why did you become a GP?”

Dr Joyce Liang
Solo practitioner at Anteh Dispensary