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EMBRACING DIVERSITY

The International Medical
Graduates Issue

Embracing Diversity

October

By Dr Tan Yia Swam, Editor

FIRST, I have an important announcement to make – the deadline for feedback on Singapore Medical Council's (SMC) Ethical Code and Professional Standards has been extended to 30 November 2014. Do submit your feedback to SMC directly (ethics@smc.gov.sg), or to SMA for collation (sma@sma.org.sg).

This month's theme is something close to my heart: international medical graduates. Anti-foreigner sentiments among Singaporeans have been on the rise and were freely expressed in social media; anecdotally, we also hear complaints about overseas doctors. Yet, is this fair to them? While it seems natural to "fear the unknown", we must acknowledge that these doctors fill an essential gap in service and training. I know most of the doctors featured in this issue personally. I am very proud to have them as fellow colleagues, and even more honoured to be considered a friend.

I pulled up statistics from the SMC website to check on the trend of overseas doctors in Singapore. The annual reports are detailed, but the numbers are presented differently over the years, so I cannot compare them directly. There are four types of registration for physicians practising here: full, conditional, provisional and temporary. Doctors are then divided into categories like Singaporean or non-Singaporean, local trained or foreign trained, and combinations of each.

There are significant figures I want to highlight regarding foreign-trained, non-Singaporean doctors. In the SMC Annual Report 2013, the comprehensive table on medical registration showed total number of registrations under each category. There were 2,044 doctors who were foreign-trained, non-Singapore residents (1,857 in the public sector, 187 in private), which accounted for 17.9% of 11,433 registered doctors. In addition, there were 3,083 Singapore citizens and permanent residents who were foreign trained (2,118 in public, 965 in private). This means that the total number of international medical graduates in 2013 was 5,127, which made up 44.8% of registered medical practitioners in Singapore that year.

The competition for specialist training positions and availability of consultancy jobs have been perpetual problems. Would it be fair to allow foreigners to enter training? If it was a matter of qualifications, shouldn't we select individuals based on merit rather than nationality? It is a complex and interesting situation, and I would love to have an open discussion about this.

I came to know A/Prof Mikael Hartman during my six-month out-rotation at National University Hospital (NUH). October also happens to be Breast Cancer Awareness Month and since A/Prof Hartman is a breast surgeon, he is doubly suited to be featured in this edition of SMA News! Together with A/Prof Philip Iau, this intrepid duo embarked on a motorbike expedition from Singapore to Sweden to raise awareness for breast cancer.

We hear from six doctors from different countries, who speak about adjusting to life on our sunny island. Dr Aung Myint Oo and Dr Ashok Tahilyani also recount their roads to achieving specialist accreditation in Singapore. On a more light-hearted note, Dr Krishna Prasad Giri introduces his homeland, Bhutan, known as one of the happiest places on earth.

Another group of international medical graduates are Singapore citizens who had studied or trained overseas, and returned back home to work. Dr Felicia Chua (Australia), Dr Julian Kenrick Loh (Ireland), and Dr Low Ying Hui (America) offer their thoughts.

I hope you enjoy this brief introduction to our foreign friends and globalised nature of our healthcare workforce. For those among us who may harbour prejudices against international medical graduates, I hope you will be able to see beyond external differences and focus on what we all believe in – to be good doctors to our patients. The next time you have an opportunity to work with an international medical graduate, especially an overseas doctor, do take the time to know him or her as a person as well. ■



Dr Tan has started a new job as associate consultant at the Breast Unit of KK Women's and Children's Hospital. She continues to juggle the commitments of being a doctor, a mother, a wife, and the increased duties of SMA News Editor. She also tries to keep time aside for herself and friends, both old and new.