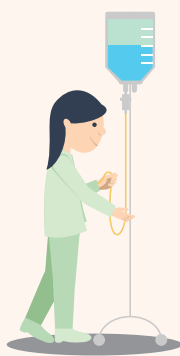


# WHEN A DOCTOR BECOMES A PATIENT



I have been to the doctor's only a few times in my life. The childhood memories are somewhat blurred by time; while recent memories are a mix of joy, fear, anger and sadness. If you watched the animated movie *Inside Out*, all my experiences with doctors are those swirly balls of golden yellow, with specks of burning red and streaks of blue and purple.

I remember seeing my neighbourhood GP, Dr Chong Ah Lek, for chicken pox and the occasional bad cough during my childhood. He was always kind and gentle. I also remember the antiseptic smell of the clinic and how I was fascinated by the tiny scrawls on

the little yellow flashcard that served as my notes. Another fond memory was the sweet taste of the pink syrup, the chemical bitterness of the pills and the reverence in which I held a medical certificate (MC), stamped and signed for which a school absence was permitted.

At the Primary Six school health screening, I received a referral for scoliosis. I recall my parents worrying about my "crooked" spine and parroting the doctor's advice that I must stretch and swim, and carry my heavy schoolbag on alternate shoulders to even out the imbalance. They were respectful of

the advice and thankful that I didn't need surgery. Once, I saw a polyclinic doctor for a pain in my right knee — I was 19 years old and had just started medical school. I couldn't describe the symptoms and to me it was just "painful"; like there was something moving inside my knee and that it would suddenly give way while walking down the stairs. The doctor did quite a thorough examination (which I appreciated only a few years later) and concluded it was nothing serious. I remember vaguely my feelings of dissatisfaction; while it was not serious, the pain did bother me. Anyway, the right knee is still a problem to this day.

After starting work as a doctor, my own health took a back seat. Early rounds, night calls, post-calls, examinations... it just became an endless merry-go-round of catching up with work and sleep. There were occasional visits to GPs or staff clinics to get an MC. By then, it had become something embarrassing and shameful. *How can a doctor be sick? What would my registrar/consultant think of me?* This lasted for years, until a few years ago when some major life events happened. That was a wake-up call for me to look after myself and my family first.

Without going into medical details, what I can share is: it s\*cked to feel so d\*\*n helpless.

### FAMILY CRISES

Bad things often happen without warning. There was a sense of unease when we looked at the scan images, followed by cold sweat, fear and the feeling of impending doom. The trained eye had seen what the heart refused to believe. A detached, clinical part of me maintained a calm and professional demeanour when discussing diagnosis and management options, as if it was just another grand ward round discussion (a tribute to years of training to be "Dr Tan"). The real "me" was dazed and reeling in shock and disbelief. Even close friends and the doctors managing our problems never quite saw the depth of emotions we experienced. One commented: "How are you feeling? You seem to be taking this well." My reply went along the lines of: "We have to. Enough tears have been shed at home. No point crying now." We knew we were in good hands and it was time to take on the role as a patient and trust the doctor to do what's best.

I wish to put on record my deepest thanks to Drs Mary Rauff, Cindy Hia, Shankar Sriram, Winn Maung Maung

Aye, Su Lin Lin, Lim Tian Jin, Ms Jacqueline Kong and Nurse Diana. I have thought long and hard about whether I should list down these names — it doesn't take a genius to figure out why we needed to see these particular doctors and I trust that readers will respect my privacy and not pry. In the end, I decided that I needed to shout out, loud and clear, how much these people have done for me. My apologies to all the other doctors and nurses who have looked after us; I might not remember you now, but at that point in time, your presence and care was deeply appreciated and you made a difference. Too often, healthcare workers only get complaints and a bad rap in the press. There's a lot of good work being done that should be acknowledged as well. Another point of sharing is to hopefully encourage more doctors to share their own patient journeys as we are uniquely placed to appreciate our doctors.

### ON A LIGHTER NOTE

In my most recent hospitalisation stint for delivery, the ward nurses asked me how I wanted to be addressed. I responded with a confused "huh?" and they clarified: "Shall we call you Dr Tan?" I told them: "No need! I'm not working. Just call me Yia Swam/Mdm Tan/Auntie/Miss... whatever you are used to." Therefore, my ward's label simply stated "Yia Swam". When passing report, the nurses always mentioned that I was a medical doctor. Among the medical staff, only my consultants knew who I was. One of the junior doctors was a student of mine and recognised me. He swore that he would protect my confidentiality — I reassured him that I trust him to be professional and not to ever discuss ANY patient. Anyway, I hardly needed to keep the birth a secret, people knew I was pregnant! At least, I assumed they did... or maybe they thought I put on ten kilograms from

eating too much but were just too polite to comment.

Every time a new doctor came into the ward, be it to draw blood or conduct a basic examination, the husband and I had our fun. The husband would point out which vein is better for venipuncture and helpfully apply the tourniquet while I would present my own history in the standard format and then pre-empt them in the physical examination steps. There was always a look of surprise, followed by a look of suspicion from the new doctors who didn't know who I was...

Moral of the story: Read *SMA News*. ♦

#### PROFILE



#### TEXT BY

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Dr Tan Yia Swam is an associate consultant at the Breast Department 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.