

PROFILE



TEXT BY

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IN PURSUIT OF PROFESSIONAL *Happiness*

Have you ever thought
of medicine as a calling?



Illustration: Dr. Kevin Loy

Are you happy with your work or in your workplace? What does it mean to enjoy professional happiness? Are there traits that can lead to increased satisfaction and provide meaning in the work you do?

We experience both positive and negative emotions at work every day. Most doctors feel happy to work in a highly regarded profession that offers direct help to members of the society, where our knowledge and technical skills are in great demand, and we take pleasure in being the recipient of a patient's gratitude and respect. However, working as a doctor is also highly stressful, mentally demanding and even physically exhausting. Dealing with antagonistic family members, having to run around to see overflow cases in far-flung wards or sudden "Code Blue" situations...

Sometimes we only experience happiness when the day is finally over as we hang up our stethoscopes and return to "normal life".

A JOB, A CAREER OR A CALLING

Dr Amy Wrzesniewski from Yale School of Management describes three types of orientation towards work — whether we treat our work as a job, a career or a calling.

People who view work as a job treat it as a means to an end — to make money for their families, hobbies and social lives. To them, a job is a chore that brings in the monthly pay, a necessity that enables the person to live for the weekends (Thank God It's Friday!) and from one holiday to the next. Work and personal life are entirely separate matters.

For someone pursuing a career, motivation is not sought from financial gain but from elements of advancement, success and acknowledgement. A career is about working for the next promotion, gaining influence in the workplace and being recognised for achievement.

People who view their work as a calling describe work as an integral part of their lives; they are passionate about what they do and some see it as a privilege to be able to serve. A calling provides a lifetime of meaningful work and leads to more satisfaction and happiness.

All this sounds very intuitive and we can identify with these attitudes easily. Medicine feels like a "job" after a long day in the wards, when we are happy to get off work and indulge

in our own personal activities. As a career, medicine offers a clear ladder of progression for doctors to climb after graduation, from housemanship to residency training, from associate to senior consultant. The learning is challenging but lifelong skills and expertise improve with clinical exposure, and the rewards of patient gratitude and collegiate recognition come later in one's career. Medicine is a profession that offers a secure job and a good career; but to achieve professional happiness and meaning, we have to treat our work as a calling to serve the society. This is challenging because our passion and dedication to help patients can easily be lost, ground down and chipped away under the daily onslaught of work and by our encounters with suffering and pain.

MENTAL WELL-BEING VERSUS MENTAL ILLNESS

In his 2002 book, *Authentic Happiness*, Martin Seligman outlined factors that can increase happiness and described the characteristics readers can identify to achieve better mental health. His notion of positive psychology came out of a reaction to the society's fixation on mental illness and the long lists of ailments found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition. According to Seligman, there is much more to mental health than the absence or the treatment of mental illness.

Seligman identified six virtues (righteous and good behaviour) that are valued across all cultures: wisdom/knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. He identified individual character traits that can be nurtured for each of these

virtues and built upon as strengths in order to achieve well-being (see Table 1). Doctors are in a good position to take advantage of these strengths due to the nature of the medical profession and the exposure to clinical situations that allow us to exercise all of these virtues.

The pursuit of knowledge is expected of doctors throughout their professional career because of the rapid expansion of medical science and technology. There is no shortage of opportunities for further training and education in medicine. Doctors who love learning and are curious and interested to expand their intellectual horizons will thrive in the virtue of wisdom. The ability to survive a long and arduous training programme and pass tough clinical examinations, followed by years of work in stressful hospital wards requires perseverance and the virtue of courage. Humanity is a fundamental virtue in the practice of medicine; doctors who do well in this virtue are compassionate and able to empathise with their patients, as well as exercise kindness and love for the sick and the suffering.

The principle of social justice is one of the pillars of medical ethics to treat all patients with fairness and equity. A doctor who treats his patients and his subordinates fairly and is a team leader exercises the virtue of justice. Temperance is a virtue that is synonymous with professionalism. A doctor is expected to practise good self-control in society and exercise discretion especially in the area of patient confidentiality, which is critical in gaining the trust of our patients. Finally, the virtue of transcendence is the ability to see the larger picture and the belief that one's work is part of the greater good that medicine offers to

society and humanity. Doctors can rely on their daily work to give them a real sense of purpose and sustain their enthusiasm in the workplace.

Seligman proposes that by identifying these signature strengths and consciously exercising them in our workplace, we will find more satisfaction and achieve long-lasting gratification over the years.

THE SUMMATION OF A PROFESSIONAL CAREER

When we think of happiness in our work as doctors, it is easy to recall those intense spikes of positive feelings that stood out in the course of our career. These could well be the moment when you passed the final examinations in medical school; the moment when you went off-call after working through the very first night as a houseman; or the time you were able to diagnose a rare disorder that had eluded your departmental colleagues. These are fleeting moments that we remember, but I think the pursuit of professional happiness is something deeper and more enduring.

In his influential work, namely the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle proposed that happiness is the ultimate purpose and goal that underlies human activity and existence. However, Aristotle's concept of happiness is different from our contemporary understanding of happiness as a transient positive feeling.

Aristotle wrote: "Happiness is not pleasure, nor is it virtue. It is the exercise of virtue. Happiness cannot be achieved until the end of one's life. Hence it is a goal and not a temporary state." According to Aristotle, happiness was attained through the course of an entire lifetime; the sum of a life lived well, for good, and with purpose.

As doctors, we can draw parallels to our own professional lives as well. If we apply this Aristotelian understanding to ourselves, professional happiness is only achieved at the end of a long medical career marked by a sense of purpose, ethical practice and mastery in the art and science of medicine. ♦

UNIVERSAL VIRTUES						
	Wisdom & Knowledge	Courage	Humanity	Justice	Temperance	Transcendence
STRENGTHS	Creativity	Bravery	Love	Citizenship	Forgiveness and Mercy	Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
	Curiosity	Persistence	Kindness	Fairness	Humility and Modesty	Gratitude
	Open-Mindedness	Integrity	Social Intelligence	Leadership	Prudence	Hope
	Love of Learning	Vitality			Self-Regulation	Humour
	Perspective					Spirituality

Table 1