

Breaking Down BEAR-iers with Teddy Bear Hospital

Text by Teresa Liew

Photos by Singapore Medical Society of Australia and New Zealand

A profession in the healthcare industry is largely defined by a passion for service and giving. As medical and allied health students who are equipped with clinical knowledge and skills, we are in such an amazing position to step outside our classrooms and widen our exposure through volunteer work.

Especially for students studying overseas, the opportunity to contribute back to the Singapore community is crucial in keeping yourself rooted to your country and it provides a platform for you to interact with your community. However, these opportunities may be difficult to come by.

Pioneered in January 2018, the Teddy Bear Hospital is an initiative by the Singapore Medical Society of Australia and New Zealand (SMSANZ).

It comprises volunteers from 12 universities across Australia and New Zealand, and provides an opportunity for all volunteers to engage with children in Singapore kindergartens and primary schools.

What's a teddy bear doctor?

The Teddy Bear Hospital is an interactive workshop that aims to improve healthcare education among young children by:

- (i) Alleviating childhood fears of and anxiety towards medical environments and procedures;
- (ii) Educating them about the importance of managing health; and
- (iii) Breaking down barriers between children and healthcare professionals to foster positive relationships.

These objectives were achieved through a series of role-play stations, to which the children brought their "sick" teddy bears to improve its health. This provided a fun and relaxed environment for children to associate with the healthcare system, while learning key healthy messages through activities and games.

Highlights of the January 2019 workshops

Partnerships

In 2019, the Teddy Bear Hospital reached out to more than 200 children aged five to seven years old from five kindergartens, student care centres and primary schools across Singapore.

In addition, this volunteering opportunity was also opened up to nursing and allied health students studying in Australia and New Zealand. This collaboration saw more than 80 students from medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech pathology, nutrition and dietetics working together in health promotion. This provided a unique platform to facilitate conversations between key members of a multidisciplinary team.

Health promotion

Volunteers ran various stations including:

- (i) "Teddy Goes to the Doctor" – participants simulate a GP clinic consultation and examine their teddy bears with different medical equipment;
- (ii) "Save Teddy" – an emergency situation is simulated and participants have to call an ambulance for help;



- (iii) "Why did Teddy Fall Sick?" – participants learn good hygiene practices that they can adopt in their daily lives;
- (iv) "What is on Teddy's Plate?" – participants learn about healthy eating habits by creating a meal plan for their teddy bears according to the Health Promotion Board My Healthy Plate guidelines; and
- (v) "Keep Teddy Healthy" – participants learn about healthy living and the importance of exercise.

These stations were well received by the children, teachers and volunteers, who all enjoyed themselves during the crafts, games and activities.

A note of gratitude

It has been an amazing experience being able to represent our universities and professions in serving our community in Singapore. On behalf of the SMSANZ, I would like to extend our thanks to those who have made this project possible. We would like to give special thanks to Dr Chia Shi-Lu, Member of Parliament for Tanjong Pagar (Queenstown) group representation constituency, and Ms Irene Ho, chief executive officer of the Luxury Network Singapore and head of Mission Diplomatic Council



Singapore, for their support of this initiative for the past two years. We are also very grateful to the Singapore Global Network for helping us reach out to more allied health students across Australia and New Zealand.

I hope that this project will encourage more healthcare students overseas to contribute back to the Singaporean community in the future. It has indeed been an amazing experience working alongside my future colleagues in the important task of health promotion.

To find out more about SMSANZ and its initiatives, please visit <https://smsanz.sg>. ♦

Legend

1. "Save Teddy"
2. "Keep Teddy Healthy"
3. "Teddy Goes to the Doctor"
4. Group photo with the participants
5. "What's on Teddy's Plate?"

Teresa is a third-year medical student from the University of Queensland and the current president of the SMSANZ. She first initiated the Teddy Bear Hospital in 2017 as part of the SMSANZ's Outreach Portfolio.

