



# Medical Humanities

## Connecting Science and Art

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The Singapore General Hospital Annual Scientific Meeting, held on 12 and 13 April 2019, was launched in unique fashion by a medical-humanities-themed performance from the doctors of the Division of Medicine. Before an audience that included the guest of honour, Mr Gan Kim Yong, Minister for Health, there was a poetry recital and a rendition of Andra Day's inspiring "Rise Up". These pieces were chosen to call attention to the growing incidence of burnout among doctors and how resilience can be fostered by mutual support.

Burnout is characterised by the triad of cynicism, emotional exhaustion and sense of loss of personal accomplishment. Despite increasing restrictions on resident duty hours, burnout persists, resulting in jaded doctors who can no longer empathise or tend to the sick. Increasing litigation and professional regulation, as well as over-reliance on electronic documentation and data, has led to a sense of loss of professional autonomy. The rights of patients appear to overwhelm the professional duties that are owed, as well as our ability to care. Data published in the *Singapore Medical Journal* in 2018 suggests that our residents have lower empathy and higher prevalence of burnout compared to counterparts in the US,<sup>1</sup> where the rates are already reaching epidemic levels. Besides the drain on medical manpower by those leaving the profession, there are also proven adverse effects on the quality of care through medical errors.

While systemic issues need to be addressed to resolve the complex problem of burnout, the medical humanities offer alternative solutions. The humanities, in many ways, serve to complete the practice of medicine by complementing the sciences.

The humanities can help restore our practices from only the diagnosis of symptoms to *concern* for the sick, and from merely treating the disease to *caring* for the person. It restores belief in the aspirations of caring for people – aspirations that brought us into the profession. This is the vision of the Office of Medical Humanities, established in Medicine Academic Clinical Program at SingHealth Duke-NUS by A/Prof Chow Wan Cheng.

Amar Vaswani's stirring poem "Unity in the Body" and Amanda Lam's soaring vocals helped remind the audience that while we were at a scientific meeting to share knowledge, we should not forget to connect with the roots of our profession and with each other. What is special about doctors engaging in the humanities is that they bring the experience of clinical reality and sensibility to the performance. To this end, a full concert and art exhibition titled "A Night to Remember" has been scheduled for 13 December 2019. As the music faded, the lyrics that lingered at our scientific meeting were:

"All we need, all we need is hope;  
And for that we have each other."

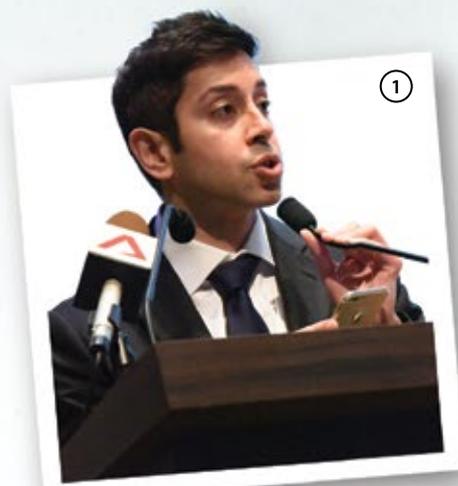
The practice of medicine is tough but we don't have to travel this road alone. We do have each other. ♦

### Reference

1. Lee PT, Loh J, Sng G, Tung J, Yeo KK. Empathy and burnout: a study on residents from a Singapore institution. *Singapore Med J* 2018; 59(1):50-4.

### Legend

1. Dr Amar Vaswani addressing the audience
2. Backing vocalists for "Rise Up" (L to R: house officer Dr Daniel Lim, advanced practice nurse Joanna Phone Ko and senior resident Dr Cheong Li Anne)



Dr Rayan is a senior resident in the SingHealth Respiratory Medicine Residency Programme and the director of "A Night to Remember".



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