

REFLECTIONS

of An Ex-HO

Text by Dr Ong Jiawen

The author is a young medical officer currently doing her rotation in Tan Tock Seng Hospital Department of Urology. She continues to be blessed with kind and encouraging seniors at work, and hopes to pass this spirit on to her juniors.

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was a cruel and proud king who was punished by Zeus to push a large rock up on a near vertical steep hill daily, only to find it rolling back whenever it nears the top and having to restart the next day. Being a house officer (HO) often seemed that way – filled with the futility of a Sisyphean life. Trudging through numerous seemingly vapid administrative work was not what we were trained to do.

Rabindranath Tagore once wrote in his poem, *"The world has kissed my soul with its pain, asking for its return in*

songs." HO-ship had less grace than the balletic poem and was etched with more profanities. At times, when bosses rage at our ineptness, patients wilfully articulate different accounts before and after the consultant arrives, families have ludicrous expectations, and nurses come at us in a pack like wolves for our inefficiencies, the stark pointlessness of our chores sink to a new level of dejection and vexation.

Amid the dreariness, there are good days too. These days, when I think about Greek myths like Prometheus and his immortal liver or Sisyphus and his innumerable uphill climbs, I am also reminded that life is most unbearable when it is painfully stagnant. Extant repetition is indisputably frightening. I remember what I said in my medicine entry interview: "I like how medicine combines the facts of science and art of being human, and unlike a nine-to-five office job, every day is a new challenge, because we see patients from all walks of life and treat a diversity of conditions." In spite of the daily trials and nuances, I am grateful, for the past year has been anything but unchanging. I am thankful for the many seniors, nurses, allied healthcare staff, patients and families who shone their lamps for my feet and lit up my dark path. I am indebted to friends, family and colleagues who loved me enough to journey together through both the fun and arduous times.

I remember many medical officers who constantly encouraged me in

my difficult moments. I remember the registrar who came from lunch to help with my collapsing patient who wasn't even in his care. I remember my consultant who stood up for me when I got into trouble with patients. I remember my ward nurses laughing and sharing their food with me at lunch. I remember that cute spunky aunty, who survived non-small-cell lung carcinoma, bilateral breast cancer and ovarian cancer, insisting that I rest and take a nap on her bed while on call. I remember buying ice cream for my palliative patient and watching her finally take her first morsel of food in days. I remember the uncle who asked, "Doctor, I know your team said I should go for the surgery, but what do you think?" The camaraderie built among our teams and nurses, and the trust our patients and families have in us – these are privileges that often only HOs have, since the bulk of our waking and working hours are spent in the wards, serving these people.

Don't despise your small beginnings. Lean hard on the people who know you best, love you most and tell you when you're wrong. Continue to love and to serve. Be firmly anchored in hope, for things will not be this way for long and seasons will change. Just remember, even your worst days only have 24 hours (or 36 hours).

Take it from someone who once walked a mile in your shoes. ♦