



# Reflecting ON A TOUGH YEAR

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

Dr Tan is a mother to three kids, wife to a surgeon; a daughter and a daughter-in law. She trained as a general surgeon, and entered private practice just over a year ago, focusing on breast surgery. She treasures her friends and wishes to have more time for her diverse interests: cooking, eating, music, drawing, writing, photography and comedy.



I'm sure I'm not alone when I exclaim, "Is it December already?!"

Looking at my calendar, my last "normal" interaction with friends and family was in mid-January. I had dinner with some old friends and there were plans for upcoming vacations with family friends.

Then, two urgent work meetings just before the Lunar New Year and that long weekend changed everything – not just for me, but also the medical profession and many in Singapore and around the world.

## Our work and the year past

I kept a close eye on local and international developments, even as my family had reunion dinner, albeit with a more subdued mood. And then we were hit with a major medical emergency in the family, which thankfully stabilised shortly after. I managed to have a few cautious gatherings with sensible friends in March, who complied with our own versions of contact reporting and tracing. But with the nationwide circuit breaker (CB) in April and May, it was frighteningly lonely. I commuted alone, ran clinic sessions to see just

a few patients, while my clinic nurse and I stayed at our own workstations. We had lunch in the clinic alone, with WhatsApp video calls to friends just to check in and stay in touch.

I was thankful for technology during this period – the outreach on social media and the support network via Telegram chat groups were very helpful in that time of great uncertainty.

And as it did during the SARS crisis in 2003 (<https://bit.ly/39vKxTG>), SMA had quickly reached out to its network, organised resources and initiated a lot of background work to support doctors, in anticipation of increasing needs not only for personal protective equipment (PPE), but also information and timely updates (<https://www.sma.org.sg/covid19>). In fact, with the support of the Ministry of Health (MOH), I initiated the formation of a Telegram chat group which included representatives from various batches of graduates from both local and overseas medical schools, and the MOH team managing the COVID-19 situation. The updates and immediate clarifications which were conveyed directly to everyone in the group were deeply appreciated by all.

## Holiday and family time

The SMA Council meets every month, like clockwork and without fail. December is when we take a break – meant to be a time to rest and relax. However, correspondences for time-sensitive matters continue.

I am still learning how best to juggle my time between the many responsibilities, so as to not short-change my family. With my increased commitments, I sometimes worry about missing out on key moments in my children's lives; be it various school events, or the day-to-day routines of going to school and bed. I now better appreciate the time spent with them and have also incorporated personalised rituals and routines just for us. While they may not be as fancy as a long holiday, I hope that these will come to form some of their best childhood memories.

Taking a holiday and being offline for a few days helps as well! I could focus my attention on my young kids and the messy fun (and angst sometimes), and then return with a refreshed mind to my work.

To purposefully relax is not as easy as it sounds, especially when one's mind is preoccupied with various things to do. Practising mindfulness and the deliberate compartmentalisation of issues helped with time management immensely. Marie Kondo popularised the decluttering of living spaces. Similar concepts may be used for decluttering of the mind. As we near the end of the year and look back in review, it is important to slow down and take stock of what's important in life.

There is no point in beating oneself up over failures and missed opportunities. I had shared in a previous column about the many kinds of losses that people suffered. While we should not forget the hurt, we must not be crippled by it. Life goes on, and we should continue to live and love well. Just as how Marie Kondo puts it – we should keep only things that speak to the heart and “spark joy”.

## Reflections and looking forward

A lot has been written about COVID-19, the impact of a global pandemic, and how the world needs to adapt to the “new normal”.

This issue, while we continue to hear from a few authors on how their lives were disrupted, and how they got back on track, we also want to end the year on a lighter note. After all, the disruptions to our practice and work-from-home arrangements have also given some of us more free time for our hobbies and to pursue new interests – whether you have transformed into a master chef during the CB, or relied on restaurant deliveries – let's see what some colleagues have to share with readers on their cooking experiences!

Finally, for all our readers, I extend the same open call for volunteers – to give of your time to share ideas and experiences; to teach in courses, to learn about developments in the medico-legal landscape; and to be mentors for our juniors. Each individual can only do so much; but together, we can create something bigger than we could ever imagine.

As we enter 2021, my vision still holds for the SMA to better engage our Members from different sectors so that we can better represent doctors. The SMA will look after doctors, so that doctors can look after patients without worries. Most importantly, may I remind everyone to practise self-care: both physically and mentally.

Here's wishing all of us a better new year. ♦

Illustration: Dr Justinian Zai

