

Attachment and Bonding

By Dr Daniel Fung, Editorial Board

Editor's Note

For the Christmas issue of the SMA News, we have invited several doctors to share their reflections on the family and life in general. This series of articles, titled: "Family Matters" is anchored by Dr Daniel Fung, our Editorial Board member. We start off this series with an article by Dr Fung himself.

It's been seven months since our family came home after my yearlong fellowship at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. I remember that as the last three months of my time left in Toronto approached, I felt a twinge of sadness. I had begun to enjoy the work I did and I was just beginning to understand the school system there. I had made new friends and was getting used to the lifestyle. I had bought a number of useful technology tools (it's funny how a made-in-Singapore HP Jornada is cheaper in Toronto) and I was beginning to enjoy using eBay, the online auction to buy things. All these served to make my impending return to Singapore a little more difficult. Yet I also relished our homecoming. We had completed an exciting time in our lives; we managed to have a new addition to our family (Peter Joseph is a born-in-Canada Singaporean), we managed to handle five kids with a little help from my mother and mother-in-law, and I got to practise and learn at the second largest centre for child psychiatry in North America (the hospital has over 80 child psychiatrists on their staff).

As I reminisce the good times, I am also struck by the constant debate about how we as a country should retain our people and talents. About how we need foreign talent because we face a constant "brain drain" to other urban cities. When I was in Toronto, I was constantly bombarded with questions from colleagues and patients alike about why I am returning to Singapore. They

look on quizzically when I speak of my obligation to return home having signed a bond. They find it hard to believe that I should feel obligated in any way. Perhaps they were wondering why the nation's needs seem to surpass my own. Or perhaps they cannot fathom the connections that I feel for my home country. But these sentiments must reflect some views. It begs the question as to why some Singaporeans choose to stay overseas. Many of the doctors in the Hospital for Sick Children were not born there. They have chosen to stay because they have found a better life for themselves, their work and their families. I offer my reasons from the perspective of a child psychiatrist.

In child psychiatry, the concept of attachment and bonding is a pivotal one in understanding early development. Most of us realise how a young child becomes attached to its main caregiver in the early years of its life. This attachment forms the basis for all future relationships. The young baby is close to his mother and would cry when the mother is not around. Separation produces anxiety in the child. But children can be attached to any caregiver. These days, I am not surprised by mothers lamenting that their children prefer their maids. After all, the maid has been doing most of the care giving. There is nothing wrong with the young child's complaints because it is merely displaying a normal response. This critical period of attachment is

usually in the first three years of life. After that, the child is usually more self assured and also aware that there are multiple caregivers that can provide it with safety and nurturance. We can draw the same conclusions in developing our young men and women. If we let them go overseas early on in their academic career, some of them will grow to love their adopted countries and choose to break their "bonds" with their home country. But if we nurture them during their "formative" years, sending them overseas at a later age will help them to feel some connection with Singapore and a need to return. I feel that overseas training is most fruitful when we have achieved some level of maturity in our practice. It also means that our trainees would have formed lifelong links here in Singapore. Correct me if I am wrong, but who are the bond breakers highlighted by the press? It's usually the young 20-year-old who wants to complete his PhD and make a million dollars before he is 26.

Overseas training has another way of affecting family bonds. We went to Toronto with the entire family. Even though I had four children when I went to Toronto, I got no additional allowances to bring along my family. What is this likely to do for some families? It forces them to do a quick calculation of the cost. Many families choose the easy way out. Let the Fellowship trainee go and the rest of the family stay behind. I have friends and colleagues who rationalise

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with me by telling me that it's better so that one can concentrate on the training, or that it's less disruptive, or that the spouse will not have to stop work. The reality of separating from the family is a problem. As someone who sees families in distress, my own sense of it is that families become strained and relationships are changed by separation, whether it is six months or six years. The spouse who is abroad feels lonely. The spouse left behind is stressed. The children grow up without an important parent. One may argue that six months to a year is a brief period. But do you realise how much a young child grows in this short time? Development waits for no one. Physical development is not hampered by lack of parental

involvement, but emotional and moral development is. I cannot help but think fondly of two classmates of mine who were in Toronto the same time as myself. She was doing her fellowship in Respiratory Medicine and he was the faithful spouse who left his private practice to a locum and became a house-husband for twelve months. Such examples are few and far between. Their children are the luckiest children in the world.

As we celebrate this first Christmas in the new millennium (this point is debatable), it would be appropriate to consider the importance of family ties and bonds. I do not just speak of the blood ties but the attachment we feel as a family in medicine. I subscribe to the Hippocratic tradition that all doctors should treat each other as

brothers (and sisters). This special Christmas issue is focused on the family. We highlight the family of the year whose father is a family doctor (pg. 10). We have an article from a journalist on why he didn't become a doctor despite the family ties (pg. 12), we have a doctor who treats cancer talk on life and family decisions (pg. 9) and we have a social worker remind us of the importance of remembering the family when we treat the patient (pg. 13). In addition, we have our usual stories of doctors and their adventures (pg. 14) and a warm story about Christmas (pg. 15).

Our roles as doctors are not just about treating our patients and their families. We must also learn to take care of ourselves and our families. ■