

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member



Don't Look Back in Anger

It has been more than a decade since my M1 days, and judging from Jin Yao's account, I guess some things just never change.

More than half my batch failed at least one of the three core subjects that year, causing quite a ripple through the medical faculty. If rumours that medical students comprise the top 1% of the university cohort were true, then Houston, we have a problem.

I was one of the unfortunate souls who spent the holiday cramming for supplementary exams, wondering how so many who hailed from top junior colleges and boasted perfect scores in the GCE 'A' Levels could perform so dismally in something we were confident of sailing through.

To this day, I suspect most of us remain clueless about the actual cause of this freak event, as do perhaps the faculty members. But rest assured that the remainder of our time in medical school passed without further incident, with a comfortable clearance rate exceeding 90% in the final MBBS.

Two points highlighted by Jin Yao caught my eye: how examiners affect your grades, and how good results do not guarantee good doctors.

Touchy topics, I admit, but also grossly underrated and frequently overlooked.

It perplexes me how, after so many years, the problem of inconsistent assessments still rears its

ugly head. Of course, we have a list of "the usual suspects" – faces we dread seeing in the clinicals, names which make us shudder. Think of them as the Voldemorts of medical school, and us the hapless Hogwarts students.

I still recall how a classmate was assigned one such Voldemort, while I was ushered to a much nicer professor just two beds away. True to form, Professor V promptly issued a direct failure, while everyone else in the same room cleared the hurdle. And when we asked our dejected friend what transpired that morning, we discovered that the topics covered extended well into the realm of advanced specialty training. The poor guy never even stood a chance.

We did not have much of an avenue for provision of feedback then. I do not know if there is one now, but maybe it is time we identify these Voldemorts and re-evaluate the exam process to ensure greater uniformity and, most importantly, accountability.

As for the second point in question, I would not be surprised if a significant portion of the medical profession disagreed with that statement. After all, Singapore is synonymous with the term "meritocracy", being a society which values educational qualifications above almost everything else. And is it not practically a given that smart people will excel at their jobs?



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Wrong. And let me repeat that so you will not forget: WRONG.

Lest I be accused of over-generalising, let me just state for the record that yes, there are indeed many top scorers who go on to become exceptional doctors. However, a word of caution to those who allow good grades to obliterate glaring flaws, who offer advancement opportunities and other career rewards based on how many gold medals you have won, even if your patients seem to suffer alarmingly high post-operation complications and your peers refuse to even drink coffee with you.

Having worked in departments which span the entire spectrum of work ethics and office politics, I have suffered the frustrations and enjoyed the occasional morale boost. I have seen how star pupils ingratiate themselves with consultants by showing off their knowledge during ward rounds, only to leave their changes undone and conveniently forget to answer their pages an hour before your call starts. One Dean's List candidate terrorised the ward staff and exploited his fellow housemen, yet was offered a prestigious scholarship by his superiors, and was highly sought after by a number of high-profile figures.

Straight A's and distinctions do not ensure steady hands, astute clinical acumen or emotional intelligence. They do not necessarily correlate with one's degree of integrity and humility, or the ability to demonstrate

patience and remorse in the face of immense difficulties.

To put it another way, we should never discount those who never excelled academically, a number of whom easily rank as the best people I have ever worked with, have carved out stellar careers in various specialties, and with whom I would entrust my own life if the situation ever arose.

I prefer to put my faith in the house officer who may not know all 11 criteria of systemic lupus erythematosus but makes the effort to stay back and help his colleagues who are drowning in changes. I trust the medical officer who can determine when someone needs to be intubated, never mind if he/she failed the MBBS twice. I avoid the surgeon with a record of horrific post-operative complications, regardless of his long list of academic accolades. And I admire anyone – junior and senior – whose moral compass never wavers, who is not fooled by sweet words and grandstanding, who works 100 times harder than the rest of us and does not expect any recognition for it. ■

