

By Ms Tan Lifeng



Thoughts of a Medical Freshman

Children often go through the phase of wanting to become a doctor. Perhaps it is the subtle influence of toy stethoscope sets, over-enthusiastic parents or even multiple memorable visits to the pediatrician. Maybe it is an innate desire of children, full of innocence, to help their fellow man in a wholly altruistic way.

I recall wanting to be an accountant actually when I was young because I liked Mathematics. After a while, I wanted to become a lawyer because it seemed cool to argue in court. Then I wanted to become a researcher, tai-tai, politician and so on. How wonderful it is to dream. We all dream. Some dreams come and go, some dreams are fulfilled and some dreams shatter.

It is a certainly a dream come true for me to do Medicine. I cannot remember exactly when I set my heart on becoming a doctor; this desire was not borne out of any particularly life-changing event. I just knew deep in my heart that Medicine was the path for me. All the questions about what I really wanted to do with my life are answered in choosing Medicine. To help and love people through medical care is what I can truly see myself doing for the rest of my life.

Being at barely the start of this journey has made me wonder how one stays through the

course. What makes this dream permanent and compatible with the realities of the world such that it is not but an ephemeral illusion? Being a doctor is not that simple as we thought it was as children. There are the taints of money, self-aggrandisement, cynicism in the profession, patient overload, lack of ethics and so on. Having been on several hospital attachments, I have seen for myself that not all doctors are as happy or kind as childhood dreams make them out to be. It is easy in the rush and coldness of this world to become callous and dour. Of course there are those who are the epitome of the purest ideals of a doctor; doctors who bring greater healing because they bother to know the patient as a person and not just the patient's physical condition.

I think that where there is a confluence of dream and opportunity such as that for a medical student, what grounds this dream in reality is that we choose to live it out as such. Some term it a calling, an innate desire, a lifelong dream, but whatever it is, loving patients, those around us and what we as doctors do, is a choice we have to make each and every day.

I have personally chosen to embark on the path of the medical profession because of a deep



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burden and compassion for people, especially those who are sick and infirmed. Various visits to senior citizens' homes really convicted me of this passion to help people at this particular point of need. However, more than feeling for people's pain due to illness, I have come to see a greater suffering, one that transcends the physical realm of pain – the privation of love. I feel this calling to bring hope and love to those who cannot see these because of sickness or other circumstances in their lives. Of course not all those who are ill are deprived of love, but often those who are do not get the right diagnosis and treatment. I believe that having the capacity to treat people on a physical level opens the door to a wider healing – that of the heart and soul. Such is the influence physicians have on their patients and we should seize this to impact people in transcendental ways.

As I reflect on the hospital attachments I did before entering medical school, what strikes me tremendously is the distinctiveness between cynical and compassionate doctors. Both types were competent at their jobs and administered professional and effective treatment. But to me, those who truly made a difference in the lives and souls of their patients were the doctors who cared: doctors who took the time to speak gently to patients, to look them in the eyes to bring comfort and convey empathy; doctors

who brought greater healing because they bothered to know the patient as a person and not just the patient's physical condition. These are the doctors who continue to inspire me because of their ethos and outlook on the profession. These are the doctors whom I hope to emulate one day.

It was somewhat perplexing that nearly a majority of doctors whom I met en route to entering medical school were discouraging me from entering the profession. And perhaps they did so because they realised for themselves that medicine truly is a calling and that without a calling it is almost impossible to soldier on and at the same time, find joy and fulfillment in the daily work of a doctor.

It was just the start of the third week of medical school when I wrote this article and already work was piling up. There are too many bones and bone features, muscles, tendons and metabolic pathways to remember. I hear from seniors that this is but the tip of the iceberg. Sometimes, *just sometimes*, the workload obliterates my view of the higher goal of becoming a doctor. And yet it is when the burden seems so heavy and almost unbearable that I find myself clinging on to why it is that I chose to enter the profession in the first place. And then I find joy in being a medical student and one day being the best doctor I can be. ■