



Hobbit's Guide to HMDP

You are now a newly minted specialist. Your parents have gone back to your ancestral village in China/India/Geylang Serai/St James Power Station to announce to your ancestral spirits that you, their erstwhile useless progeny, has finally done something that will honour your ancestor's hallowed names, never mind if your ancestors could have been human traffickers and opium den operators.

You are also very hungry and broke because you now have to pay your MPS premiums, which depending on what specialty you are in, could amount to at least two months of your take-home pay – leaving you to scrounge for food from your patients who you have conveniently asked your rich MO to order “Nil By Mouth” AFTER the nurse has ordered the patient's meal. Either that or you try to operate everyday because (a) you need the money and (b) OT has free food. You thank your lucky stars that your spouse is NOT a doctor and therefore can feed your two kids (whom you have finally decided to wean them off milk samples from your classmates now working in nutritional companies. Their school teachers have told you that their daily consumption of infant formula samples during recess have caused some concern among other children and parents in the primary school).

But there is always hope in life. Like striking TOTO, 4D and betting that Liverpool will win next season's Premier League.

And of course, to bring a smile to your miserable life, there is HMDP. HMDP stands for Holiday for Medical (but Depressed) Practitioners and is the cornerstone strategy to keeping our hospitals well-stocked with specialists who have done wonderful research overseas but somehow unable or refuse to perform similarly groundbreaking research locally.

The first question to ask is where to go?

This is the most important question. Important criteria to sway your decision include the following:

- The availability of outlet mall shopping nearby;
- Proximity to a winegrowing region and/or great fall colours;
- Good Chinese/Indian/Malay food within a 20km radius;

- Direct SQ flights and
- The ability of the locals to pronounce your family name, especially if it happens to be “Ng”, “Png”, “Sng”, “Chng” or “Tng”. Trust me on this one.

Examples of less important criteria would be:

- The reputation of the centre;
- Whether the centre has a research or teaching programme;
- Whether your supervisor is still alive and
- If the centre has any sophisticated equipment such as X-ray and ventilators.

Places to avoid include those centres that have metal detectors and blast doors in their A&E. Other places to avoid going include those that serve macaroni with cheese five days a week in the staff canteen, and globs of food laced with soya sauce are classified as “Asian” with no specialisation. Such findings are often common to many centres of medical excellence. But remember, we have to get our priorities right.

The second question to ask is when to go. Naturally it is not up to you but up to your head of department to put you up for HMDP. And then the request goes into a little black box in your cluster's HR department where you can be absolutely sure no one will ever hear about it again until they are reminded to ignore it again when your departmental head screams at them. If you are lucky, the HMDP committee, consisting of similarly depressed but senior doctors (the effects of their HMDP having worn out 15 to 20 years ago) decide on your fate and hopefully you will get to go – right after your administrator with two MBAs get to go for his executive MBA in an ivy league university business school in which an all expenses paid business class wine and dine for the spouse is included. Even though this same administrator cannot even decide whether to reimburse you for 20 bucks of petrol claims.

THINGS TO DO WHILE ON HMDP

There are many important worthwhile things to do when you are in HMDP. Some of these things may actually involve the practice of medicine. For

example, it is imperative that you obtain at least three pieces of doctor's white gown bearing this distinguished institution's name logo. And you shall wear this gown on your return to work in Singapore everyday. You have no idea how for example the logo "Massachusetts General Hospital" impresses your patients even though you were actually there as an experimental subject and none of your patients can even pronounce "Massachusetts". You will continue wearing these gowns until the gown has frayed collars and streaks of (patients') dried bile and blood or when you die (in which case you should be buried or cremated with the coat on). The next most important medical thing you must do is to obtain a nicely framed certificate from this famous institution stating that you have undergone a fellowship with them. This will come in very handy when you go into private practice and you will hang up this exclusive fellowship certificate together with your medical degrees and Grade Two piano certificate. Most importantly, you need to start every other sentence at unit meetings, journal clubs and mortality rounds with the opening phrase "When I was in (name of famous HMDP Centre) ..."

Another thing that you must do is get an apartment with an extra room. This is vital to the welfare of your department in Singapore. Rest assured that every cheapskate colleague will be bunking over in that extra room when they "just happened to drop by". Funny how everybody from your department just happens to drop by when they did not even bother to drop by your bed when you fractured your ankle and was warded in Singapore. Nonetheless, you need to be hospitable, if for no other reason than that these people are the ONLY people who will bring you rations of curry flavour cup noodles, mini-prawn rolls, *sambal belacan*, *Bak Kut Teh* spices and other critical supplies while you are on HMDP. In return for their kindness, you will bring these people who have flown 8,000 miles from Singapore to be with you for a sumptuous meal of imitation Singapore/Malaysian food whereby a small plate of *sambal belachan kang kong* costs \$30 in Singapore dollar terms.



Photo credit: Dr Wong Tien Hua

Also, do arrive a week or two early in the place where you are supposed to work. This is very important because you will realise that in many centres of excellence located in first world countries, amenities like water and electricity only arrive after you have done the necessary paperwork which takes about the same time as the survival period for a person with low grade Stage 1 colon cancer. Also, electrician and plumbing services cost more than a Table 7 surgical procedure and will arrive after a Stage 1 Prostate Cancer has gone to Stage 4 right before your eyes.

Speaking of *sambal belachan*, it is timely here that I remind you to treat this foodstuff with extreme caution whilst in foreign lands. Do not ever heat up the lunch you brought from home if it contains *sambal belacan* in your hospital pantry microwave. One of my friends did so and he was mistaken for a terrorist. I understand that he has not been seen since. Rumour has it he is now either encased in blue cheese in Guantanamo Bay or fed preserved herring three times a day in a BSL 4 facility. Other substances that similarly endear you to the natives include *cin-cha-lok*, fried salted fish and raw prawn paste.

If you are on HMDP with your family, remember to remind your children that they are patriotic Singaporeans. This is best done by bringing along 23 tons of assessment booklets for them to finish while overseas in addition to their regular schoolwork, the latter of course may amount to about five minutes in a week. If you are there with only your spouse, then proceed to produce zygote, morula and blastula and so on, within your first two months of arrival. This will ensure that the end-product, if male, has the glorious opportunity to serve national service in Singapore because he wants to, not because he has to.

Also sign up with some Singapore networking body. This is extremely important, because in the event that a natural disaster should unfortunately befall you such as what happened in Oklahoma, the RSAF will come swooping down in their Apaches and Chinooks to save you. Besides, this Singapore network will invite you to their New Year parties where there is free flow *satay* and *mee siam*. Hopefully not in Oklahoma.

Finally, after all the strenuous medical tasks you have to perform as part of your HMDP programme, you may still have time to do some research. This is very important because it shows to your bosses back home that you have learnt something other than golf and fly fishing during your stint overseas. And besides, it will be the only chance for you to do research before you are back to the grind of seeing 35 patients in the morning clinic (with the specialist outpatient IT system down of course). And when that happens, you will remember quite fondly your HMDP days, especially so if your surname is not Ng, Png, Sng, Chng or Tng. ■