

# FIVE Of The Most EMBARRASSING Things That I Have Done

By A/Prof Daniel Fung, Editorial Board Member

I have been told that we should ask all the silly questions we have when we are in school so that when we finish our education, we will not embarrass ourselves by appearing ignorant and asking stupid questions. This simple advice helped me pluck up courage to ask my lecturers questions when I was in medical school. It helps when you are young and inexperienced. As a junior doctor, this philosophy helped me to learn from my more erudite senior colleagues. But what happens when we become older and more senior? Is it dignified to admit that we don't know? I would like to share my embarrassing moments because I think that I am still learning all the time, and it's no big deal to say we are wrong and that experienced doctors do make mistakes.



## EMBARRASSING MOMENT 1 – Chip off the Old Tooth

I was teaching a class of post-basic nursing diploma students on child mental health. This is a yearly affair and I am extremely comfortable doing the talk, which is three hours long. During the break, I was casually chewing on a tasty chicken wing when I felt a crack in my mouth. To my horror, I realised that it was my front tooth that had broken off. It was weakened many years ago when I was a hyperactive child and had fallen on it. My dentist managed to fix it then but had informed my mother that the tooth would always be weak. A cavity (probably caused by my love of sweets) weakened it further and on that fateful day, the Buffalo-style wings did their damage. I had to continue and complete my lecture with the broken front tooth. Boy, was I self-conscious! I could only concentrate on what I was doing after I confessed that my tooth had broken to the class.

## EMBARRASSING MOMENT 2 – What a Relief!

I used to be afraid of giving talks and one of the ways I treated my social phobia was to keep exposing myself to these feared situations. Once, I was late for a one-hour lecture I was giving, and missed going to the toilet as part of my preparatory routine. This resulted in my starting the talk with a somewhat over-filled bladder. It didn't help that I was talking about hyperactive children and when I came to how some of these children would move about the class a lot, including asking to go to the washroom, that just reminded me of how much I needed to go too. Finally, unable to hold my bladder any further, I asked the class if I could have a toilet break. Much to my relief (in more ways than one), I was able to run into the toilet before any "accident" could happen.



## EMBARRASSING MOMENT 3 – Speaking on the Fly

This reminds me of the time my fly broke while I was in the washroom, just before I was to give a talk to a roomful of teachers. I proceeded to give the talk anyway, but after a while, I became extremely self-conscious and felt that I really needed to speak about it. Of course, I then felt that everyone was looking below my belt as I spoke on managing angry children!

## EMBARRASSING MOMENT 4 – A Hair-raising Tale

I have a specific morning routine but sometimes when I am disturbed, I lose the sequence. One morning, I reached my office and my colleague asked if I had a new hairstyle. It was then that I realised that I had forgotten to comb my hair after applying gel because I was distracted by my children – I looked like some character from Dragonball Z!

## EMBARRASSING MOMENT 5 – Misery Loves Company

I remember one other situation which was embarrassing for the series of mishaps that occurred. I was driving to work one morning when I realised that my gas tank was close to empty and the amber alert lights had come on. I thought that there was enough petrol to get me to work. There was a gas station near the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) and so I got on the CTE confident that I could get there and then visit the station. I couldn't have been more wrong. By the time I reached Bishan, the car started to slow down and despite my stepping on the accelerator, nothing happened. The car slowly ground to a halt. Fortunately, I managed to steer it to the left shoulder but I was stuck in a car that had completely run out of petrol. It was then that I realised I did not have a phone on me AND my bladder was feeling rather full. It almost felt like a moment in the movies except that it was really happening to me. To cut a long



story short, I managed to flag down a car, borrow a phone and call my wife for help. I also found some bushes to relieve myself during the wait.

## EMBARRASSING MISTAKES AND OPEN DISCLOSURE

Talking about driving, lawyers always advise you not to admit that you are in the wrong in an accident. I once ran a red light because I was confused by the traffic lights in a particular stretch intersecting Bukit Timah. A turning motorcyclist nearly collided with me and fell as a result. I stopped and helped him and his pillion rider but my natural inclination was to be honest. In all my accidents where I felt I was wrong, I have always apologised and it has always helped me in a positive way.

I attended a healthcare quality improvement conference in Orlando in December 2009. It was my second time; the first was in 2004. In 1999, the Institute of Medicine in the United States of America published a landmark article titled *To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System*. It describes how doctors, through medical errors, cause death and harm instead of upholding the old adage “Primum non nocere” (First do no harm). The press picked up on this and it was widely reported in the news.

In fact, I remember how some clinicians have remarked, “Why learn from the Americans? They have killed millions of patients, and they have the audacity to teach others?” At least the Americans can admit to medical errors. Do we?

The Institute of Healthcare Improvement in the US is led by Prof Donald Berwick, a charismatic paediatrician. In his plenary lecture, he spoke of respect and gave a wonderful example of how a Ghanaian midwife made a difference in her community by showing respect to her patients. Dr Berwick described the midwife's act of giving everyone stepping into her centre respect regardless of their background. If they were dirty and smelly, she would offer them clean clothes and a warm bath but gently and not with despire. If we truly respect our patients, they deserve to know the truth. If we make a mistake, we should admit it, even if it's a near mistake or what we in healthcare like to call “near miss”. I know of colleagues and senior management in hospitals who feel that our patients will never understand and will turn the tables around and sue us.

Mistakes are part of this wonderful experience of being human. The statement “to err is human” ends with the suggestion that only when we admit to our mistakes do we allow for forgiveness to occur. This is really the basis for open disclosure. In healthcare, we have the tendency to be afraid of making mistakes, or when they do occur, hastily sweep them under the carpet. This in fact continues to perpetuate the myth that mistakes are made by mortals but doctors can be divinely impervious to errors. Admitting to our mistakes and apologising helps patients believe in our work. In so doing we can also learn the humility of wisdom. **SMA**



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