

# A DOCTOR'S MUSINGS – ANY REGRETS, DOC?

By Dr Jayant V Iyer

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"**W**as it worth it? Would you have done things the same, if you were given the option to start all over? Any regrets, doc?"

These are questions that doctors – specifically junior doctors – are often asked or ask of themselves especially on a pensive post-call night when they return home from a good 36 hours of work. What is my answer? Well it is a little complicated.

You see, I come from an Indian background. For us Indians, we either make the cut as a doctor or a computer engineer or ... or else. Well to be fair, these days, options have opened up and many Indian children are given the option of becoming what they truly want. They may choose to aspire to become a surgeon, paediatrician, anaesthetist, general practitioner or just about any type of doctor they want to be. And yes, they may aspire to become a computer engineer as well! In Singapore, options are even wider for Indian children. They may also be allowed – if you permit me to generalise – to use their

innate gift of the gab to make money as lawyers.

My mum wanted me to become a doctor. My dad wanted me to become whatever I wanted, but gently reminded me that his dad was a doctor and a new doctor in the family was long overdue, but it was my choice anyway. Hell, I wanted to become a doctor. Who wouldn't? You help people, people respect you, people call you "Doctor", and you make loads of money while you're at it. Right?

Not exactly.

You do help people. But not all doctors are altruistic gods. Really.

People do call you "Doctor" most of the time at least (some call me "lokun"), but respect? Not so certain. With an increasing number of doctor soaps and sitcoms that humanise and to a certain extent scandalise the originally divine sanctum of medicine, doctors have pretty much lost the halo that once came along with their stethoscopes. And frankly, besides GPs, the odd cardiologist and junior house officers, not many doctors come with a stethoscope anyway. Even cardiologists

these days are quick to push the button for a 2-D Echo – and rightly so – rather than discuss the various sounds heard through the stethoscope. That is left pretty much to the keen medical student to delight himself with.

In the West and in increasingly Westernised countries like ours, medicine is steadily getting viewed as a business where failure to meet the customer's, I mean, patient's needs may be met with stern legal suits and increasing insurance premiums for doctors across the board. But hey, we still get called "Doctor", right?

And doctors do get paid loads. Or do we? To answer that question, I got together a bunch of fellow junior doctors who calculated their total number of hours worked over a month and divided their monthly pay by that. Results were humbling, to be euphemistic. Amidst a generous outpouring of expletives, we found that house officers generally earned an average of \$10 an hour, while medical officers (doctors 2 to 6 years out of medical school) managed a range of \$15 to \$25 an hour. But pay does increase with time doesn't it? I do hope so, but as an SAF doctor getting \$2000 credited to my coffers on a monthly basis, and paying off my car loans using my wife's MO pay, it seems distant. However, I am going to "ORD, *lob!*" in a bit, so back to my \$4000 a month. Yippee.

I need not elaborate on the pay a person of a similar intellectual capacity may earn as a lawyer, banker (at least those bankers who're still keeping their jobs for the moment) or a business-savvy computer engineer. Also, people who choose these tracks get started earlier as compared to when a doctor usually hits the wards or clinics.

And of course, for the treasured prize of becoming a specialist, one studies through his career all the way till his mid-30s before finally "exiting" his training and entering the market as an accredited specialist. Furthermore, the specialist and other non-specialist doctors continue their learning and

studying throughout the rest of their lives to keep themselves relevant.

So with this outburst of apparent negativity and seething cynicism, what would my answer be to the posed question?

As I said, this is a little complicated. Having recently gotten married, money has become a consideration like never before, as has "family time", where once in medical school such considerations were non-existent.


Overall, I do love practising medicine. Regardless of whether there is any show of gratitude on the patient's part, there is a gush of joy and self-satisfaction that runs through me, whenever a sick patient leaves the clinic or hospital a cured and productive member of the society (Honest!). Never mind the numerous patients I do see everyday who seek to be non-productive members of society just for that day or two with or without organic medical issues. I must admit that I felt ecstatic when given the opportunity to drill holes through

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skulls to drain a brain clot or two during my neurosurgery posting. It also gave me immense pleasure to pluck out fishbones from people's throats or dislodge foreign bodies from the eye while doing my emergency medicine posting. You get my drift.

So while there are many irritations including the long hours (and long years) of studying and the not necessarily commensurate pay, I believe I would have done the same had I been given the choice again. In my opinion, the many positive changes I am equipped to bring about in patients far outweigh any disappointment or disillusionment which medicine might have brought about.

But I still wish I was more aware of the things that go into becoming a doctor, so that my decision was more rational and was made with greater insight. This perhaps is my only regret.

Enough rambling from me for now. It's time I got that cheque from my wife to get that car bill sorted out. I love this job! 



*Dr Jayant V Iyer is sick of many people at dinner parties, incessantly asking him questions such as "Can you please advise my son to take up medicine? How is it being a doctor?" yada yada, and hopes this article answers everything once and for all!*