

Magical Generation

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei



It's that time of the year again, when the festive season is around the corner. One thinks of nice dinners and sharing meals with family and old friends, enjoying the unique atmosphere, especially with the evening lights in certain parts of the city.

The medical students invited me to be the Guest of Honour at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine Dinner and Dance last month. I wrote a speech for the occasion and decided that I would expand it into a column for the October issue of *SMA News*:

Initially, when confounded by the thought of being relevant to this new generation of students, I went to Google what makes them tick. I found many tags assigned to them, among them "Generation Y", "Millennials", "Echo Boomers", "Strawberry Generation" and even "Trophy Kids", where no one loses and everyone gets to go home with a trophy, badge or at least a door gift.

I found some characteristics of the "Millennials" quite interesting; for example they grew up in an era where the Internet had just started taking off, and they do remember a time

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when it was not yet pervasive. And as they were transiting into teenage life, they had exposure to modes of instant communication like texting, instant messaging, Internet Relay Chat and emails. This led on to file sharing: Napster for their music, BitTorrent and YouTube for their visuals, Friendster, Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter for their social needs.

All this has resulted in the most "connected" generation we have ever seen. I remember once when a parent brought his teenage daughter in and complained that she was tired all the time. I asked my key question: did she have her phone on all night, and

she sheepishly said yes. The diagnosis was made – her friends would text to wake her up to start up her computer from sleep mode, so that they could use Microsoft Messenger to communicate.

I explained to her that she probably could not resist the urge to stay in touch with her friends on a 24/7 basis, participating in their thoughts, joys, urges and rush of emotions. However, she had to understand that she could not do so without exacting a toll on her body and more importantly, on her time. I asked her if she had thought about the hours lost on communication.

I reiterated the fact that two hours spent messaging her friend was good for their relationship but was probably trivial in terms of the value it created.

She could have spent that part of her time reading a good book, playing the guitar, watching a good movie and still talk to her friend for 30 minutes. Her parents proceeded to lay down the law and at bedtime, all devices were switched off so she could rest through the night. I did toy with the idea of a special button that one could install in houses to make the home a dead zone for all communication devices and computers!

Just as the “Millennials” are connected to their peers, what is interesting is that they speak quite a bit to their parents. In the US, the “Millennials” tend to stay at their parents’ homes the longest and will delay their ritual of moving out. Some call this “sponging” but I believe most Singaporean parents do not mind and look quite kindly on this behaviour.

So far I have used “Millennials” to describe this generation, but I prefer to use my own label of the “Magical Generation”. I will stop here and attribute this label to my niece who told me that the world is now at your fingertips; if you dream of, think of, wonder about an experience, a project or an idea, you can always reach out through the Internet and ask someone who has done it all, to tell you how to do it. How magical is that?

Precisely how many degrees of freedom are we talking about here? Well in every situation there is *yin* and *yang*. This is idealism in its rawest form; one can look at the negatives and the positives. The positive aspect will be to use the idealism in a constructive way and think about doing something

meaningful; be it mission work in Indochina, playing a sport well, writing a play, participating in a debate, or putting together an art piece or installation.

The more sinister and negative aspect would be self-radicalisation, white collar crime, racial slurring, online bullying, coordinated suicides, sexual predation and the list goes on. In essence, every parent’s demons and nightmares would come true. We are also cognizant that negative

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traits such as elitism, materialism and arrogance should be combated at this formative stage and at some point we must win the battle for this generation’s hearts and minds.

On a more positive note, as we in the SMA interact with the “Magical Generation” in our medical schools, we also wish to imbue them with hope, positive idealism and goodness by way of mentorship, leading by example and material help. To this end, our Medical Students’ Assistance Fund is an important instrument for us to reach out to these students and provide more than just moral support.

I ask you to cast your mind back to previous issues where we had published thank you letters from recipients of our fund. Some of these recipients come from situations that are so far removed from our present daily lives. There are sick or deceased breadwinners, bankruptcies, and family members who have special needs and therefore take up vital family resources. The common thread is that we have a bright, young, and determined medical student from the “Magical Generation” who has no control over his or her circumstances. We should then cast our mind back to our own circumstances in the past and recognise, sympathise and empathise with his or her lot. Then, we can reflect on our present lives and do our best to help our future colleague in his or her deepest and darkest hour of need.

I wish festive greetings of the season to all SMA members, colleagues and friends, and am confident that you all will know what needs to be done. SMA



Dr Chong is the President of the 50th SMA Council. He has been in private practice since 1993 and has seen his fair share of the human condition. He pines for a good pinot noir, loves the FT Weekend and of course, wishes for world peace...