

If we start training everyone to be their own physicians, empower them to lead healthy lifestyles and give them access right within their homes and communities, we may no longer need to contend with bed management, full hospitals and ambulances being diverted.

Eat, Pray and Love

- a journey towards discovery

By A/Prof Daniel Fung,
Editorial Board Member

I was in a small cabin at Lake Tahoe when I received an email asking me to write an essay on my hopes for the New Year. The cabin is part of a camp ground called the Camp Richardson Historic Resort, which my wife had found in an Internet search for places to stay in South Lake Tahoe. Actually until September 2010, Lake Tahoe was something I heard of only in the movies. My daughter, Joelle, taking her “O” levels this year suggested it was a place where our family could go on vacation. I thought that it sounded refreshing and so tasked the kids, along with their mother, to plan for this holiday. In the next three months, they did Internet searches, visited the library and asked around their friends. So here I was in historic Camp Richardson. I should have guessed that anything with the word “historic” was just another way of saying, well, old.

The cabin was tiny. Our family was large. Seven warm Singaporean bodies squeezed into two bedrooms and one large sofa bed. There was only one toilet, and we took turns in the mornings and evenings to wash up. Temperatures soared to a high of five degrees in the day but dropped

to below freezing at night. We huddled around the gas fireplace and two other heaters to keep warm. Yet in the middle of what Singaporeans would consider hardship, there was a beauty and wonderment about this natural lake in the mountains. Lake Tahoe is not a volcanic crater lake but one formed naturally through movement of the earth’s crust. I have travelled widely but the natural beauty of this lake is indescribable.

The trip to Lake Tahoe was perilous by my Singaporean standards. My car was a large four-wheel drive but I was unaccustomed to the winding roads and high speeds that Americans seem to relish. Add on the bitter cold and fear of icy roads covered in snow made the journey to beautiful Lake Tahoe a tense affair. But when we got there, enjoying the thrill of skiing at the Heavenly Ski Resort and taking in the sights of the lake and mountains all infused into a palette of colours, sounds and smells made it all worth it.

Perhaps you may be wondering where my meandering writing is taking us. Well in the midst of nature, comes moments of self-reflection and discovery. Like my family vacation, the year 2010



Memorial Point



South Lake Tahoe



Lower Falls, Yosemite Park
(where we went after leaving Lake Tahoe)



Emerald Bay

began with many challenges – mental health services in Singapore had been given a boost in the last three years with a National Plan and a huge infusion of government spending. People were taking Psychiatry and psychiatrists more seriously. There was an increased interest in medical school for Psychiatry and medical students spend up to two months (for those interested in electives in Psychiatry) in a posting. An average medical student spends a month in Psychiatry. This is a huge increase from the time I was in medical school. Today, research is now a real possibility for most of our doctors. In the last three years, we have taken on a trainee in Psychiatry and given him the best possible start towards becoming a clinician scientist. We now have a medical student who is spending eight months with our department participating actively in a research study.

Who could have imagined that was possible? Barely ten years ago, I was lamenting about the lack of research training in Psychiatry. Since 2007, we have embarked on

an ambitious plan to provide mental health services for children and adolescents at a site where they both work and play – their schools. By 2011, every school in Singapore would have the support of a mental health team to identify young persons who are at risk or are developing signs of mental health disorders.

The journey towards discovery is a step that we in Psychiatry have decided to take. We started out, much like my trip, with a little head knowledge and a lot of heart knowing that we were trying something different. This same journey must be taken if we are to move the practice of medicine out of the silos of our hospitals and clinics. There is a need to re-draw the boundaries of our work. Why wait till patients are sick before we start to treat them?

Health screenings have been touted as the way forward but I would like to propose something even more daring: start the treatment where it all begins, in the hearts and minds of the people themselves. If we start

training everyone to be their own physicians, empower them to lead healthy lifestyles and give them access right within their homes and communities, we may no longer need to contend with bed management, full hospitals and ambulances being diverted. We need to start this truly holistic journey in the place it all begins, during the time when we are students. Our schools can be the hotbeds of health education. However, we must make this preventive education count so that our children understand what it means to be the greatest physician of them all, the one who can heal himself.

Wishing one and all a Journey-full New Year! **SMA**



Daniel Fung is the Vice Chairman Medical Board (Clinical Quality) at the Institute of Mental Health where he is also the Chief of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Dr Fung is an avid believer in Population Mental Health and knows

we will never have enough clinicians to do all the work, just like his five children will not be enough to change our diminishing birth rate for Singapore.