

Dr Foo Chek Siang, a surgeon specialising in General and Upper Gastrointestinal Surgery at Changi General Hospital and also an avid athlete, shares his life of sports and surgery with *SMA News*.

A typical day in my life... starts at about 4 am when I wake up for a quick coffee before heading off for a bike, run or gym session depending on the training season and schedule. I return home by 6.30 am for a shower and to prepare breakfast, before driving my son Jonathan off to school.

I usually reach work between 7 to 7.15 am, and normally have breakfast either in front of the computer while mopping up paper work and answering emails (like I am now) or during the daily morning meetings at 7.30 am.

Dinner is normally at home with the family at about 6.30 pm, before which I try to get some laps in the pool with the kids. A couple of evenings a week are otherwise devoted for swim training and church group meetings.

I read to the kids before lights out at 8.30 pm, and the day ends with some couple time or (very contrastingly) housework before getting all exhausted.

The best memories of my surgery training abroad are... In France, my best memories were probably of lazing in the cobblestoned city square in the late afternoon, over espressos with the other surgical fellows, after a long intensive operating list.

In Australia, the best times were our free days on Monday mornings after the ward rounds, when my boss and I would do a couple of mountain stages in the national park near the hospital, before talking about work over a late lunch by the coast.

Regarding the actual surgical training, my single most memorable incident was operating on this patient in Australia, who spent a year sitting on her couch eating nothing but junk food. She was brought into hospital only because she grew too big for the couch and fell onto the floor, weighing in at 270 kg. She managed to lose about 40 kg on a diet and was only able to walk after intensive rehabilitation. Unfortunately, her liver was still so massive so we did not manage to perform the intended sleeve gastrectomy.

Surgery is different in France and Australia as compared to Singapore...

I was astounded at the work-life balance of my mentor in France – he was able to run a very successful surgical practice (operating five days of week and an average of four majors a day) and still sail his yacht in the Mediterranean every weekend, while spending time with his family.



Dr Foo and his family on a recent visit to France

THE WIND IN HIS WHEELS

I figured that it was largely possibly as a result of the efficiencies in his practice which minimised the amount of dead time (time which is spent waiting for things to happen).

There was a similar work-life balance with certain bosses in Australia, but the efficiencies were not as pronounced, especially in the public hospitals where some of my patients had to wait one year for a hernia repair. However, the level of appreciation from the public patients despite these shortfalls was just amazing. I supposed that with a clear dichotomy between free public and paying private healthcare, patients in the former sector are more empathic to the efforts of a public surgeon.

My fondest memories of medical school are... definitely those precious moments spending time together as a clinical group! It is heartwarming to reflect on those years we spent wandering the wards together, through all the adventures and misadventures, and to see how far each of us have progressed on in our different careers.

The most challenging thing about being a surgeon is... having to deal with the helplessness of surgery in the face of terminal illnesses. My most vivid memories of patients are gathered while sitting at the bedsides of cachectic patients with disseminated peritoneal metastases from gastric carcinomas.

The advice I would give a young doctor who is thinking of becoming a surgeon is... Well, don't be in a rush! I understand it might be a little difficult given the exigencies which the residency demands, but spending a little longer doing different postings before deciding on a particular specialty will probably give a little more focus and inspiration especially when the drudgery of training sets in.

I got into cycling in 2005... when my surgical colleague Bernard challenged me to take part in a corporate triathlon. I bought my first bike in San Diego after presenting a paper at a conference and have been cycling since then.

The best part of cycling as a sport and a way of life is... Physiologically, cycling is great as it gives one a great workout without the pounding which



comes with conventional running. It's an escape from the stressors and drudgery at work - the feeling of speed and wind as one connects with the bike via nothing else but a racing heartbeat, simply frees the mind and refreshes the body. Many thoughts of work and patient care are kindled while beating the wind, pounding the tarmac or gliding through the pool.

I would also liken the job as a doctor to the work of a domestique in a peloton. We support the leaders in their race against disease by shielding them from the elements, provide nutrition by shuffling back and forth from the support cars. However, despite all the support and care we provide, there is always a personal component to the struggle and the patient will ultimately need to cross the finish line on his own.

If I could get any bike I wanted, it would be... I can't ask for anything more than the current ones in the stable. It's (often) not about the bike.

A favourite moment or event in my cycling career is... I wouldn't quite call it a cycling career! A recent memorable event was a three stage tour of central Malaysia, the first of which involved a climb up Cameron Highlands. It was almost like a different world, working on the gradient through mist, drizzle and cool air. It reminded me of how much nature we have lost here locally.

I am currently reading... Karen Armstrong's *In the Beginning* and Michael Ondaatje's quintessential *The English Patient*. *In the Beginning* is an easier read compared to Ms Armstrong's previous *A History of God*,

but it offers the same philosophical approach to our relationship with a very mystical God. *The English Patient* is simply an enveloping read with the complex weave of characters who are each still dealing with their own inner demons, in the gorgeous setting of the Tuscan countryside.

Yes, I've also seen the film, *The English Patient*... and it probably counts as one of my all-time favourites!

On this note, some of my favourite films are... I must confess that I have not had the luxury of lazy time to catch a non-cartoon movie since our kids came along! My knowledge of movies have been caught in a time freeze since! I suppose some other favourites are *Chocolat* (yes, Juliette Binoche again) and *Dead Man Walking*.

For me, the menu and setting of a great meal would be... Great meals are always convivial, with great wine and company. The menu is occasionally secondary, and the ambience creates the setting for a great ending. Warm and crispy-skinned Cantonese roast duck with a good bottle of Pinot is a match truly made in heaven, and so is a large plate of homemade fusilli in pesto, shared in front of the television with my kids.

If I could be a microorganism I would be... Tough one, but the first organism to come to mind is *Helicobacter pylori* – it's microaerophilic (good for endurance sports) and migrates when conditions become unfavourable in the antrum. **SMA**