

# President's Forum

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**W**e have completed yet another year for the College, the 51st year since its founding in 1971.

As I look back at the past 3 years that we have soldiered on under the spectre of COVID-19, I am aware of the many sacrifices our healthcare heroes have made in the fight against this stubborn virus. I recall how in the early days we had to scramble to procure PPEs just so we could continue to provide much needed service for our patients.

Fast forward to the present day, and we see that the vast majority of Singaporeans have been vaccinated, with 92% having completed the primary vaccination, and 78% having had 1 booster<sup>1</sup>. The Ministry of Health also adjusted the DORSCON level for Singapore from Orange to Yellow on 22 April 2022, in line with the better resilience of Singapore residents to COVID-19 as a result of our local population's excellent vaccination status.

People have begun venturing out socially, often with a vengeance! Many restaurants are fully booked, and bookings often need to be made months in advance. The same easing of restrictions also allowed us to meet face-to-face for the College Commencement Ceremony, which was held this year on 23rd July at the Stephen Riady Auditorium at the NTUC Centre. It was a pleasure and privilege to physically see all the trainees and tutors together, and not just through a computer screen. I am all for the IT advances we have and virtual meetings were absolutely essential, as they allowed us to carry on with our programmes and CMEs. However, it is so much better to be able to see the repartee and social interaction in an actual physical meeting!

Immediately following the commencement ceremony, we held our 51st Annual General Meeting as is our tradition. It was good to be able to finally have a physical meeting after a hiatus of 3 years, and it was indeed a wonderful opportunity to meet up with friends young and old. We were able to start on time as we had quorum, and the proceedings went very smoothly. Concerns regarding the training programmes were raised by Dr Lawrence Ng, and these concerns were timely and well received. This is an ongoing challenge and we are taking active steps to address them.

In recent weeks, many of us have had to deal with more and more acute respiratory infection (ARI) cases as we appear to be dealing with another wave of Omicron. Long queues can be seen in front of clinics as the sick rate seems to be going up. All this puts a strain on doctors and healthcare staff, and all of us really need to practice some good self-care to sustain ourselves. We hear of many young doctors

share about burnout and lack of work-life balance. A 2016 review on "burnout in primary care physicians" by Dr Lawrence Ng, looked at this phenomenon. It quoted Herbert Freudenberger who described the state of exhaustion in the helping professions as "burnout syndrome."<sup>2</sup>

So how do we avoid burnout? Is there a solution, a magic bullet that can help to alleviate this problem?

History is often a good place to look for answers. The eminent physician Sir William Osler once said, "While medicine is to be your vocation, or calling, see to it that you have also an avocation – some intellectual pastime which may serve to keep you in touch with the world of art, of science, or of letters."

Is the solution as simple as that? It is incredible and yet comforting that, over a hundred years ago, it was already well recognised that we needed to get away from our daily work, to engage in some hobby or interest outside of medicine to recharge ourselves. This exhortation holds true today, especially in the light of increasing physician burnout in our highly charged healthcare environment.

For some of us it could be singing or learning a new musical instrument; for others it could be cooking and baking. We have colleagues who are avid gardeners; who have such productive gardens, they are constantly sharing the produce and plant cuttings. I myself have discovered the joy of baking bread... it is always wonderful to share the product of our attempts to bake that perfect loaf!

Whatever it may be, engaging in such avocations will go some way to get us grounded and in touch with our humanity. By doing so, we exercise adequate selfcare, which in turn can enrich the relationships we have with our patients and colleagues, and thereafter better care for our patients.

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1. <https://www.moh.gov.sg/covid-19/vaccination/statistics>.

2. Ng CLL. Burnout in primary care physicians and interventions - An evidence-based review. Singapore Fam Physician 2016; 42(1): 6-12.