

N Balachandran Memorial Lectureship - 2012

ORTHOPAEDICS AND THE FAMILY

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It is amazing how orthopaedics is so ingrained in the lives of human beings. We, human beings, have a limited life span. With life expectancy having increased with improved nutrition and healthcare, there have been increasing need for 'spare parts'. Daily, we see numerous people coming into our clinics for various problems...some are elderly, some are young, some have sad stories, some making a fuss....It's all in a day's work for an orthopaedic surgeon.

I wake up at 6am and rush out to reach the hospital before morning rounds. I meet my team and we run through our patients one by one. I wonder what the patients think of us. Do they even remember our faces as we rush? Then we hurry to clinics to see an even more blinding number of patients. Just like a whirlwind, the meeting is over just as the patient is given a diagnosis or a reassurance. Do we really make an impact in their lives? Do they really appreciate all the strife and tears we put in to be in the position we are in today? Maybe they do, maybe they don't. As we all have heard, nowadays, people do not respect doctors in the way that they used to. Perhaps it is the Generation X syndrome. Perhaps it is because of the rushed pace that we see patients. Perhaps we could explain better. Perhaps we could be a bit less self-centred. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

When I awake to see the serene faces of my children as they slumber in the wee hours of the morning, I wonder....is this all worth it? I see so little of them and they see so little of me. Where would we be 10 years from now? Would I know them better when they are able to argue and reason or would there be a generational gulf in between us? I turn to the face of an elderly patient who, by most standards, is a 'nice' patient. She is frail and bent over, having come for a total knee replacement. I tell her that the surgery went well and she beams. I feel happy for her and am glad for the mooncakes that she gave in appreciation. Well, at least we have some instant gratification sometimes.

What about delayed gratification? I definitely see the light at the end of the tunnel of this long and arduous journey of traineeship. I wonder again. Is the light truly attainable at the end of the pain of training and exams, sleepless nights, long absences from the family? I look to my Prof. He seems relaxed and jovial. He must be basking in that light. I like his car. He has a nice address. Perhaps one day I will be as successful as he. I receive one box of mooncakes, he gets numerous boxes a day! He must be skilful. The patients all appreciate his work. I do hope that I will be able to improve the lives of others, one limb at a time.

But I turn around and I hear gossip. What? You mean he is leaving, too? My heart is unsettled. Maybe I am making the wrong choice? Maybe the person who is leaving knows something I don't know. Maybe, maybe..... I turn to my classmate-turned-GP and he seems to have a better life than I. He has a nice car, nice house, nice family. Maybe I should have taken that route, maybe I should have chosen the easier way out. Maybe all this sacrifice will show for nothing in the end. I look around to my peers for comfort. I guess we're all in the same boat. We've started the journey, steered the course...we're nearly hitting dry land, I comfort myself. I visited my classmate-turned-GP and can't say the work conditions are anywhere near the glamorous cosmetic GPs. I guess we all have our struggles. My friend nods in reply.

Back to bones again. Why are bones so important? Look at the slimy snail in the garden. The snail doesn't have a bone in its body. It requires the shell for protection. Without a solid foundation, how can other less-strong parts be supported? Who could be the backbone? I dare say it's the better-half. The person who holds the family together. The one who supports the orthopaedic surgeon in his absence. The one who puts up with the pressures that come with studying for exams. The better half props up the body but doesn't do so with a prize at stake. The better half doesn't see the light at the end of the tunnel, the better half doesn't see the nice house, the nice car. All it takes for the

better half to support and hold up is the other's dream.....Could I really do all this for someone else's dream? I don't know because I haven't tried. I'm living out my own dream.

But truly, are we in this job for the long run or would we be forced out of business pretty soon? I sit here and I wonder, what scenarios could make me jobless in the future? Bionic people, self-regeneration or even a shortened life expectancy? I suppose that as long as there are vehicles on the road and a large number of people commuting daily, there will always be those emergencies with fractures etc. Bionic people? Well, probably orthopaedics would be at the forefront of bionics. Aren't we the ones to fit people with prosthetics? In the future, it would probably be our job to hook up the prosthetics to the biological parts of the body. Self-regeneration seems very sci-fi. That could happen but isn't likely to happen in my working life span. Shortened life expectancy isn't likely either. I can't imagine people dying off at 40 like humans used to before the invent of modern medicine. Therefore, I think I can safely say that I have put all my chips on the right card....I hope...

As I wash my dermatitis inflicted hands after the last surgery of the day, I take a deep breath. I am tired, I am satisfied. I queue for the shuttle bus to take me back to Carpark H. As I trudge to my car, dragging my call bag with me, I imagine again...next time, I will be able to park within the hospital. Saves me 15 minutes! I start the engine of my Japanese sedan and I drive home, home sweet home.