



Blog of the Month

AMPJ Blog of the Month: April 2023 Edition

Dr Summer Chan is a Foundation Year One doctor working in the Bedfordshire region. For this month's APMJ blog post, she shares with us her reflections on her recent Palliative Care placement and describes what being a FY1 in Palliative Medicine may entail. Thank you, Dr Chan! Interested in submitting something yourself, have any comments or questions on this piece? Email submissions.apmj@gmail.com or tweet us @APMJuniors

Reflections on my FY1 Palliative Care Rotation

By Dr Summer Chan

The bus trailed to a stop and I disembarked at a tiny, idyllic village. Fresh, cold air filled my lungs. I began walking through residential streets towards my new job – a hospice. I would later recall one of my patients, a veterinarian, recounting the different farmers they knew in the expanse through their window.

I was one of the lucky few foundation doctors to have a Palliative Care rotation in my FY1 year. In fact; it was paired with Acute Medicine, which meant I sometimes felt like I was wearing two hats. I did, however, also find both jobs fed into each other; as I inserted a nasogastric tube for a palliative care patient in chronic bowel obstruction, or reassured worried families on the hospital ward. It ultimately meant that my skills grew synchronously.

Prior to my placement, like many others, I had limited palliative care exposure as a medical student. On reflection I honestly do not think I fully understood what the specialty involved and I would have probably fumbled through a vague definition if asked. I have thus written this article to give other foundation doctors a small insight into my personal experiences of the specialty.

Reflection #1: The space to learn

I quickly learnt how to prescribe and also set up syringe drivers. I learnt how to deal with the distressing symptom of breathlessness or the more uncommon symptom of hiccups. I learnt how to discuss ceilings of care and talk about facing the prospect of dying. These are conversations that many junior doctors find themselves in and that I have often sometimes struggled through. One day you are a student and the next you are trying to explain what DNAR means to a relative over the phone. And isn't ensuring a good death as important as active treatment? What I valued was the

opportunity to practice finding the words I wanted to use in such a conversation, in a very supportive and senior-led environment.

Reflection #2: Time with patients and their families

A huge blessing about a hospice placement is the amount of time we had with each patient. This was such a stark comparison to the lightning speed ward rounds in the hospital. It meant I had the bleep-free time to delve into a patient's concerns, think through how to manage their symptoms pharmacologically and conservatively, as well as understand what was truly important to them and their families. I saw the relief and softening on a family's face when we were able to fully listen to their concerns. I saw a patient in context of who they were and how they wanted to be seen. As one nurse put it to a family, "We are not like a hospital!"

Reflection #3: A sense of belonging

Lastly, a personal highlight for me was meeting colleagues of the same faith within my workplace. Having moved, like many others, away from my family and friends, the transition into FY1 was sometimes lonely. I was quickly welcomed into a Tuesday prayer group made up of a variety of healthcare professionals who worked at the hospice. In this group I found comfort, support, and peace. I greatly appreciated having this connection at work, and fifteen minutes in my morning to start the day on the right foot.

My Palliative Care rotation proved to be eye-opening, and I hope to encourage final year medical students to consider it when choosing their foundation placements. There is always something new to learn. I believe these skill sets will truly benefit anyone no matter what specialty they end up in, as all of us will care for patients who need good Palliative Care.

