

# DOCTORS ON EMERGENCY DUTY



The emergency department of a hospital is a highly charged workplace.



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guessing game to diagnose and treat his illness. Even with the information, it could still be a guessing game, but at least we will be able to make better decisions and more accurately tailor investigations and treatment for the patient."

She advises people to visit the many general practice clinics in Malaysia and Klinik Kesihatan when it comes to minor cases such as cough and colds, simple food poisoning, and minor cuts and wounds.

## Job rewards

Despite the high demands of the position, Dr Hilwani finds a deep sense of fulfilment in what she does.

"When you are looking after critically ill patients, they are in a vulnerable condition. You are sharing a highly emotional moment of their life. It may be the scariest moment they have ever experienced, for them as well as their family and close friends.

"Naturally, emotions will be running high. Being able to manage the patient and their families well during this vulnerable time is very rewarding."

She adds that there are always positives to look out for when caring for a patient, even if it as simple as giving oxygen to someone



Doctors share highly emotional moments of critically ill patients who are in a vulnerable state.

who has difficulty breathing or giving a painkiller to someone with a fracture.

"The result of even these simple measures, especially when the effect takes place rapidly, alleviates their suffering.

"To manage a complex patient with multiple-organ failure and be able to stabilise them enough so that our colleagues can take over their management in the ICU is even more rewarding.

"Even for patients who are very ill and have a poor chance of survival, to get them and their loved ones ready for their 'next journey' is something I find rewarding. It is those kinds of moments that keep us going no matter how tired we are."

## Down time

Like anybody else, she admits that emergency physicians are human after all, and thus enjoy the same things other people would.

"When I used to do night shifts, I would sometimes go out for a nice cuppa tea or a movie with friends

or family before work. If I am really tired, I may go for a massage.

"I also have a lot of cats. Just playing and cuddling with them is a great way to de-stress as I am sure any pet owner will tell you.

"But honestly, going about your housework and running errands also helps us relax in the sense that it takes one load off our minds knowing that it is settled."

## Doctors in demand

Dr Hilwani believes that there is certainly a demand for emergency physicians nationwide because they hold an important role at the front lines and function as gatekeepers to a hospital.

However, there is room for improvement. "Not all hospitals in Malaysia have emergency physicians. Some small district hospitals don't even have dedicated doctors in their emergency departments. It is the same doctor covering the emergency unit as well as the wards," she says.

"At the moment, some hospitals without emergency physicians are

grouped in clusters and emergency physicians from a nearby hospital will visit these hospitals periodically and provide administrative advice as well as training."

She is, however, optimistic for the future as there are national strategies in place to fill this void and station emergency physicians in all hospitals in the country.

"The College of Emergency Physicians Malaysia is cognisant of the fact that there is a mismatch between the number of training posts to specialise in emergency medicine and the number of applicants.

"Hence, we have recently embarked on a parallel training pathway to involve other parties aside from the three universities that already conduct the training programme.

"In addition, we have also grown as a specialty to have our own special interest groups within the emergency fraternity such as pre-hospital and disaster medicine, critical care, trauma and toxicology. These are exciting times for us," says Dr Hilwani.

THE responsibilities of an emergency physician is indeed varied and exciting, but when asked about some of the most challenging aspects faced daily in the line of duty, Dr Hilwani Kaharuddin replies:

"Would you be surprised if I say people management? To me, that is the most challenging aspect – getting patients and their loved ones to understand their medical condition and treatment process; urging them to take responsibility for their own health; and creating a professional and happy working environment for staff members.

"Doctors are expected to manage clinical conditions. We are trained for that, and we can always get help when managing a challenging case. A multidisciplinary approach (input by various medical specialties) is good and has become the norm, so the biggest challenge is people management," she opines.

## High burnout rate

Dr Hilwani, who serves at Ara Damansara Medical Centre, shares that the challenge of people management is on top of the stresses that come with working in a highly charged environment.

"There is definitely a lot of stress working in emergency. It has been reported that emergency medicine is in the top three specialties that report the highest burnout. This is true not just for emergency doctors but all personnel who work in the emergency department, including the triage staff, nurses, cleaning staff and registration clerks."

Teamwork, Dr Hilwani says, is thus vital in such situations where people are always anxious about their illness or the well-being of their loved ones. Having a good and skilful team in sorting and attending cases based on the severity of illness relieves a lot of stress of the work.

Not one to be fazed by these challenges, Dr Hilwani takes it all in her stride. This includes ensuring the emergency department provides for patients, ensuring the policies and SOPs are laid out and adhered to, supervising the management of patients by junior doctors, and providing training for other doctors and nurses.

She also shares that it is part and parcel of the position to be updated with new developments in medicine so as to ensure appropriate care is given to patients according to international standards, as well as recommend new medical equipment to the hospital.

## Non-essential visits

While emergency departments are naturally fast paced, Dr Hilwani says that efficiency can be further enhanced if people do not visit hospitals for inappropriate reasons.

She provides instances of patients who visit the emergency department to change a feeding tube or urinary catheter, or even replenish medications when they forget to bring along their drugs for their chronic medical conditions when they travel.

She reminds patients who need to visit the emergency department to be certain of the chronic illness they have and the medications they are on. Bringing along any old investigation or medical reports will also be helpful for the medical team attending to them.

The people accompanying the patients should have the same information at hand. As Dr Hilwani explains: "Many times, the person accompanying the patient is not the one looking after the patient. Without the patient's important health information, it will be a