

## SMAC 2023 Student Reflections

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Class of 2027

Respected family members of our silent mentors, faculty members and my friends:  
Good afternoon to all of you.

My name is Zhen Yi, a year 1 medical student studying here in NUS. I see this opportunity today to deliver this speech in our silent mentor appreciation ceremony as a great privilege and honour. I am not saying this as glib words of formality; Rather, they come from my most heartfelt gratitude to the immense contributions of our silent mentors to my training. Indeed, I cannot speak for every one of my colleagues, but for me at least, my silent mentors have been the greatest teachers as a young doctor in training. That is why I am very happy to be here today: I may never be able to, in this life, thank these teachers of mine who have taught me all about the beauty and complexity of the human body in person, but at least I would be able to show my appreciation to you, the family members, whose sacrifice has been equally great in making this learning possible for me... (And also to my lecturers from the department of anatomy who are here, for making this entire process possible as well.)

I thought it would be meaningful for me to now share with you my experiences learning from our silent mentors. I hope that this will be a story that sheds light on how much I as a medical student learn from our silent mentors.

The story I want to share with you began even before I applied from medical school. Back then, I remembered discussing with my schoolteacher about learning anatomy using real donated human bodies. My teacher asked me: Are you sure you will not be frightened? Out of showing my conviction to study medicine I said of course not. The truth is I was considerably intimidated. Now, I can very confidently say that every Tuesday, the day we have lab sessions in the anatomy hall, is my favorite day of the week. What has caused this change from then to now?

My first encounter with our silent mentors was during our anatomy pledge taking on the first week of school, where we pledged to treat every one of our silent mentors with respect and humanity, indeed, as if the body still contained the soul or the spirit. *This* was the rite of passage into this school, a quintessentially and exclusively 'healthcare' experience, where I really felt the gravity of the responsibility and privilege bestowed upon me.

I can still remember quite vividly what happened that day, we were shepherded into the anatomy hall, a large group of around 10 of us clustered around each silent mentor. In the background we knew the media was there, somehow they were able to blend in without affecting the entire solemnity of the whole experience; only a few days later did I see pictures of some of my colleagues appearing on the newspaper, signalling to me how significant this entire experience was such that it was able to draw attention from the public. I also remember the unfamiliar smell that I have now grown used to... I even remember the name and face of my first silent mentor, whom the department has put in so much effort to humanize, by placing a card with his name and picture in front of where he lay. He is and will be one of my greatest teachers, teaching me respect, responsibility, gratitude, humility and bringing me to come face to face with the human condition.

I would say the whole process of the anatomy pledge went on quite fast, but it did not take away from that deeply human experience.

After that was when I slowly grew used to learning from my silent mentors every Tuesday. Every session, many different silent mentors would show me the human body, one small part at a time. We started with the upper limb, where I didn't believe there were almost 20 muscles in the forearm until I saw it on my silent mentor, then the lower limb, where, for the first time, I identified a structure correctly—the longest and largest nerve in the body. The journey continued as we went through the trunk, and then finally the head and neck, just completed a week ago. It's now almost the final exams and I still don't know which side of the body the liver is! Jokes aside,

These were the sessions where my silent mentors have so selflessly shown to me the, or their, human body: every muscle, blood vessel, ligament, space, opening...It is an immeasurable contribution to my education.

When writing this speech, something that I wanted to bring across was the irreplaceable role our silent mentors play in our learning of human anatomy, especially with all the technology available today. NUS provides us access to these technologies, first and foremost, complete anatomy, an app providing us with a 3D model of a human where every part can be added or hidden; and secondly our virtual reality sessions with those cool VR glasses that help us to come face to face with a virtual model. These are futuristic and excellent learning aids, providing another dimension to human anatomy beyond the textbook. I have to thank the dean's office for purchasing them for us and persuade them to continue providing these tools for our future batches.

But I return to my original point on the irreplaceable role of our silent mentors. It is difficult for me to provide an accurate description of learning of anatomy to those not in the healthcare field, so let me bring up an analogy. I invite you to think back to a time when you were on the move, you had a map in your hands, but you were completely lost. You could have been overseas in somewhere unfamiliar, or maybe just in Singapore—I think the roads are complicated enough here. You're looking at the map, you have planned out your route, but you just can't find your way. You know *roughly* where you are, but somehow you are not *exactly* where you want to be. I don't know if any of you have had that feeling before, but that's what I feel when I step into anatomy hall every Tuesday. I am holding my map (the lecture slides) and looking at the roads (the *real* human body), and I am lost. Almost completely lost. I know I am staring at the arm, of course, I even know I am staring at the inner part of the arm, but where exactly is *that* muscle I was so used to hearing over and over again in the lectures?

The reality for me is that I can be well versed with my 'paper map'—the textbook, or even be aided by my 'google maps'—the 3D anatomy app I was talking about just now, but I would still be almost completely lost when a real human is in front of me. Maybe I am just not talented in navigation and anatomy, but maps and real roads just somehow appear different for me! So every Tuesday, a guide who 'knows the roads' will show me around, helping me connect what I learn in theory to what I see in practice. We may not see everything demarcated perfectly as taught in the lectures: Maybe this muscle fiber has blended in with the one next to it, maybe this blood vessel is a variant from the ones commonly seen, maybe that skull has an extra opening not shown in the textbooks, but this is reality. Our silent mentors may not have the most textbook perfect anatomy, but they are, indeed, the most human. And as far as I know, I have signed up to provide care for humans in the future.

On parting, I want to, once again, thank my silent mentors for their selfless donations to medical education, and their family members, sitting here today, who must have undoubtedly made great sacrifices to make this possible. To the faculty, especially the department of anatomy, thank you for coordinating this learning opportunity for us. I will definitely look back on my Tuesday anatomy hall sessions with fondness.

I believe that my silent mentors might have passed on, but their contributions live on, in the medical students they educate, in the patients that these students go on to treat, and thus, in the health of the society for generations to come.

Thank you.

