

Let us keep the spirit of Schweitzer

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This particular issue of NZMSJ features an article about one topic that is quite personal to me – volunteer medicine. This article rightfully observes the sad reality where volunteering overseas as a medical volunteer has become a trendy, fashionable experience for people, and volunteers really spend the most of time travelling and feeling good about themselves while the work they do provides little or no practical help to which they were originally designed to achieve.

I myself did a 5 week volunteering project in Vietnam at the end of last year, and I can attest to such reality. While a lot of people volunteer hoping to make a difference in the world, there are also a fair number of people who participate in volunteering program for skewed reasons such as wanting to be viewed as selfless and/or making one's CV look good.

I would not point fingers at these people and say that the deed is wrong because the intention was not pure. As Albert Schweitzer once said, people may imitate if one does something wonderful – so, as long as people adhere to work ethics and achieve original purposes of their volunteering project, I think the outcome is that it probably did provide a small help in some way to people who needed it.

This brought me to a question though – how important are our attitudes, our intentions and our motivations? As doctors, we are in an occupation where our professions were created to help people in sickness and distress, and I think in earlier years of medical school, the strong desire to be the kind, empathetic and selfless doctor is very strong. However, as all of us progress through the years, that particular ambition for many of us become dimmed by numerous challenges we face – workload, long hours, difficult inter-professional relations, exhaustion, sleep-deprivation, effect the work has on our personal relationships and etc. And at times when I find myself feeling almost numb to various clinical situations, I feel that I had somehow lost the majority of this great motivation that used to drive me to do good, to do my best, so that I can be of help. And this notion makes me very sad.

Of course, with enough time to recover, most of us regain our motivations. But I have seen too many times where a job, is just a job, in Medicine. I am not denying this – being a doctor is the occupation we chose. However I think it is always important to remind ourselves that being a doctor is never just a job – it is a difficult work that not just anybody can do. At the heart of being a doctor – which is for all of us – should be the never-dying desire to be of service to people who need our competence, empathy and hard work when their health had let them down. And I have a feeling that for the rest of our lives as doctors, this will be the eternal challenge – to find the right balance between “selflessly” looking after others and “selfishly” looking after oneself.

But I have faith in myself, and all my colleagues, that we will keep our Schweitzer spirit: “Life becomes harder for us when we live for others, but it also becomes richer and happier.”