



New Zealand Medical Students' Association Conference: Transcend 2018

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➤ Samuel Choi is a Trainee Intern. He has found most rotations during medical school engaging and interesting, so has no idea in which direction to specialise, but he does hope to be involved in research in his future medical career. When not in hospital, he stays active playing football and basketball, and is a strong proponent of work-life balance.

For 13 years, the New Zealand Medical Students Association (NZMSA) conferences have adapted to the present climate of medical students and the issues we face both now and in the future. *Transcend 2018* was no exception to this, providing a weekend of laughter, contemplation, and even a few tears.

As the name suggests, this year's conference focused on developing its delegates to become more than they initially believed themselves to be. Acknowledging that providing quality care for our patients requires cognisance of our limitations, but also an understanding that we have the ability to overcome them.

The conference began on a wonderful, windy Wellington afternoon with the inaugural A-MAS-ing race – a 12-station adventure where teams ran through hipster alleys, rode up the famous cable car, climbed hastily up rock walls, and even jumped into the frigid harbour off the diving platform. Team costumes were themed around different medical specialties, from active wear (sports medicine) and cardigans (geriatrics), to construction gear (orthopaedics) and spectacles (ophthalmology).

The evening Welcome Soirée was held at Mac's Function Centre along the picturesque waterfront. The local craft beer on tap and lively atmosphere made meeting our counterparts from other schools effortless. We quickly formed a bond over our experiences of medical training, with no shortage of entertaining anecdotes and unofficial tips for surviving and thriving. With the presentation of prize hampers to the afternoon's champions, the conference team offered a warm welcome to our nation's capital.

To begin the first day's academic sessions, a beautiful karakia was delivered by Te Oranga President and Wellington student, Chayce Glass. This was followed by an inspiring address from the NZMSA President, Jibi Kunnettedam, who reminded us the privilege to be in such positions of influence and benefit to society. This is something that we do not always recognise, and it set a tone of appreciation and humility – a healthy mind-set to engage with the programme ahead.

The first keynote speaker was Daniel Flynn, founder of the company,

ThankYou™. Employing a sophisticated pay-it-forward approach, their profits from selling bottled water, food, baby products, and hygiene products fund initiatives in developing countries. They focus on providing immediate food and water-sanitation aid to these people, but also develop sustainable community-based projects tackling nutrition, hygiene education, and obstetric outcomes. Although ThankYou™ has won awards for its innovative business model, things have not always been smooth sailing. Recounts ranged from crucial supply chains pulling out of deals, to retailers refusing to stock their products in an over-saturated market. While tough to listen to, it quickly dispelled any notion that ThankYou™ became what it is today easily, reiterating the necessity for perseverance in the face of adversity.

Next, the political panel invited Dr Liz Craig (Labour) and Michael Woodhouse (National) to discuss pertinent issues around the state of health care in New Zealand. Each opening statement focused on the upcoming budget and the tension between ideological approaches to health care and the realities of working with limited resources. Topics often discussed among medical students, such as the implications of the 8.0 equivalent full time student loan cap, the impending introduction of the national bowel cancer screening programme, and the complexities of District Health Board (DHB) and Primary Health Organisation responsibilities, were tackled by both members. The atmosphere was electric as the speakers volleyed the issues, while being peppered with punishing audience questions.

At this point the first breakout sessions began. Keynote speakers were open to all delegates and often had an overarching theme. This contrasted with the breakout sessions, which covered a variety of topics from suturing skills and emergency department trauma, to helpful tips for getting involved in rural medicine. The inclusion of breakouts allowed delegates to tailor their conference experience and to more readily participate in the smaller group discussions.

My first session was with anaesthetist Dr Siva Namasivayam, who shared his experiences with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). While being unsure of what initially led him to MSF (his family thought it was a mid-life crisis!), he has been on numerous missions since, and described

each of them as incredibly fulfilling and equally difficult. Because his anaesthetic skills were best suited to treating warzone surgeries, he was often working in active conflict areas, to the fear of himself and his family. To a captivated audience, the harrowing and deeply personal stories of patients contrasted with medicine in New Zealand so starkly that it sounded like a different profession altogether.

Keynote speaker, Dr John Wyeth, contrasted his practice in gastroenterology with his other, very different role as Medical Director of PHARMAC. Highlighting the varied possibilities open to medical graduates, he provided a timely reminder for us to be open to any opportunity. We were lucky enough to find out the secret to his success: to be adaptable. Which, although simple, was the perfect advice for medical students who were all too familiar with the question 'have you figured out what speciality you'll be going into?'

Luckily there to give us some ideas, were representatives from many of the specialty training colleges and the New Zealand Defence Force, as well as key support organisations like MAS and the Medical Protection Society. As we enjoyed the smorgasbord of food made possible by their generosity, our questions were answered with smiles and plenty of merchandise. There were so many good pens that the conference's Instagram prize was won by a delegate's post about the pens' various positive and negative traits.

Following a day jam-packed with new perspectives and unexpected experiences, we were all ready to unwind at the Gala Dinner. We dined in Te Papa, from which a sublime view of the city and the waterfront could be seen. Myriad ideas and thoughts from the day's programme darted across the tables, we posed for endless 'professional' photos, and we had seconds of the buffet. During the festivities, the inaugural SMO and RMO NZMA teaching awards were presented by the chair, Dr Kate Baddock, and Jibi Kunnethedam, to Dr Helen Pike (General practitioner in Blenheim) and Dr Aaron Ooi (Paediatric registrar from Waikato DHB), respectively. Hearing about the dedication and willingness of these doctors fostered an appreciation and humility that left a lasting impact.

After a long night of celebration, Sunday morning began full throttle with keynote speaker Associate Professor Nikki Turner, the head of the Immunisation Advisory Centre of New Zealand. Assoc Prof Turner challenged us with the realities of primary care in New Zealand, specifically the impact of socioeconomic factors on our potential as a nation to be healthy. Her explanation of the subtle interactions between elements of our culture, both as a nation and in the medical profession, was intriguing and certainly thought provoking.

This was followed by another breakout segment. I was able to hear from Dr Pippa Mackay, the current NZMA President, a practicing general practitioner and a part-time practicing abortion doctor. A quick overview of the legal terms and logistics of abortion in New Zealand was covered, before the floor was opened to a battery of questions covering everything from Ireland's recent abortion referendum, the ethical aspects of remuneration of abortion papers, and even the difficulties of having pro-life protests being held outside your house!

Before we knew it, it was already time for the final keynote speaker to take the floor. Mr Mat Brick shared his story of 'accidentally' becoming a world class duathlete. Stunned by his achievements at such a young age, we anxiously waited to hear his formula for success. Instead, he disclosed his development of substance abuse, culminating in a letter from the Medical Council informing him that he would be deregistered for a minimum of a year. While a self-admitted low point, Dr Brick persevered and subsequently healed broken relationships, a family, and an incredible career as a pioneering arthroscopic hip surgeon.

The well-being panel picked up where Mr Brick left off, with two students sharing their challenges with anxiety, depression, and substance use. Sofie Rose, one of the panellists, emphasised the importance of

prophylactic well-being, reminding us that it is easiest to forget about ourselves when things feel good or we are distracted. Often, we ignore the signs of imbalance until they are staring us right in the face, just as a patient might. Don Laing articulated the intricacies of his relationship with alcohol as a mechanism to cope with stressors in a candid and very moving way. He reminded us to be grateful for supports we have in our lives and to protect one another and others within a field of numerous pressures. Dr Tony Fernando closed the panel with the bold comment, 'we are all crazy', and encouraged us to remember that 'it is alright to not be alright'. Pausing for lunch, it was clear to see that the well-being panel had impacted everyone deeply. The feeling of compassion in the room had exponentially increased as we sat with the discomfort of fallibility, seen not only in our peers and in respected clinicians, but in ourselves.

NZMSA Conference *Transcend 2018* was enlightening, provocative, and deeply sobering. We were challenged to look beyond what lies in our hands, to look for the potential in ourselves and the world we live in, and to face the future with burning conviction. To borrow Daniel Flynn's words to summarise the weekend, we need to 'get out and stay out' of our comfort zones because 'we all have the power to change stuff'.

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