

CHANGE THOSE DIAPERS, BOY!

True Stories of a Male Student Nurse

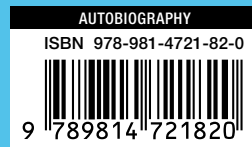


From the ICU to the psychiatric ward, student nurse Irwin Choo takes us on a journey into the world of nursing in a typical hospital in Penang, Malaysia. As a teenager, Irwin knew he wanted to be a nurse despite the objections from his family. With great determination, he persevered in following his heart and clinched a sponsorship for a three-year nursing course.

This book is an honest and humorous account of one man's start in the nursing profession. Heartwarming and entertaining, it gives a good insight into the challenges faced by a male nurse in a predominantly female world.

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For Review only

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DEDICATION



To Group 35, my classmates—the people who endured the three-year journey with me, who directly or indirectly became a source of laughter and happiness. They are now all over the globe touching lives through their nursing career.

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Special thanks to:

- Chan Ming Hwee, my mentor, motivator and best friend, who continued to believe in me even when I had stopped believing in myself.
- Yong Mei Kew, my mother, teacher and biggest fan, who helped me countless times with my silly grammatical errors.
- Chrystin Choo, co-owner of Individium.com, who showed me that dreams do come true if you want it badly enough.
- Sying Cheong, my quiet inspiration, my helper and the one who is keeping me sane all this while.

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AUTHOR'S DISCLAIMER

The anecdotes in this book are solely the author's personal encounters and views. They are by no means the representation of any college, hospital, organisation or person and carry no attempt to mock or offend anyone.

While many of the anecdotes are real, names, circumstances and places have been changed to protect the real identities. Any resemblance to organisations or real person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

INTRODUCTION

I am just another ordinary staff registered nurse who dreads the 14-hour shift and hopes that the hand-over report after each shift will finish as soon as possible so I can rush out of the door and check out. Most of the time, after a horrendous night shift, I look forward to filling my rumbling stomach with some steaming hot food, preferably carbohydrates because I do not want to wake up hungry in the middle of the night—or rather, day since I had just ended night shift. (I suspect the biological clock that regulates my night hormones has malfunctioned slightly. So, my colleagues can understand my unpredictable mood swings during these times.) I also look forward to washing off the grime of the night and falling into bed, only to realise insomnia is having the upper hand again.

I love working in the Emergency Department—from cleaning up a patient's urine after I had my breakfast, sticking my finger into a patient's orifice to check for the consistency of his stools just before my lunch, to bandaging injured limbs with bones sticking out. How could I forget the silly-looking plastic apron I have to wear (that makes me look like a butcher)

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to avoid being drenched in blood? There was also the time when I had to carry an obese patient twice my weight down from the fourth floor because there was no available lift; it was then I realised there was no need for gym any more!

But before I continue about my present-day adventures, let me bring you back to my past. Every experienced staff registered nurse was once an innocent student nurse.

I came from an all-boys school and having to adapt to a classroom where the majority were girls was new to me. After a while, I began to understand the girls' behaviour better as we worked in the different wards. Not all of them enjoy persuading little kids to swallow colourful syrups while others were excited about bottle-feeding infants.

I had always wondered how difficult it could be to bottle-feed a hungry newborn, but when I tried it myself, it took me up to one hour to finish feeding one baby. I also witnessed the delivery of a baby and the stench from the placenta almost made me throw up.

During my postings to the common medical and surgical wards, I encountered all kinds of patients—from old uncles asking for beautiful student nurses to perform dressing for them, to old aunties who were always curious about other patients' diagnosis. I also got a glimpse of what surgeons actually do in the Operation Theatre.

My interactions with the patients in the Psychiatric Unit formed my best memories in the three-year course. It broke

my heart to see young people labelled as having psychiatric disorders. There were also those who had been in the unit for years. I often wonder how a psychiatric patient thinks; do they regard themselves as perfectly normal?

Follow me as I journey through the Intensive Care Unit facing patients and their fight for survival. The conversations between a critically ill patient's relatives and his specialist can be dramatic at times when the two parties do not see eye to eye. Some people might blame the doctor if the patient's condition deteriorate unexpectedly while others understand that life is pretty unpredictable. Not everyone sees and accepts death in a positive manner, even though we all know that death is inevitable for we are but flesh and bones. It is often difficult to break the news of a demise to a group of already crying relatives. The situation becomes more intense when we perform resuscitation for a child. Often, nurses who are mothers themselves find it extremely challenging to endure the whole process of resuscitating the child. Some would leave the emergency room and return after five minutes with their eyes watery and red. As medical personnel, we must remain calm and professional at all times, but we are humans too.

Have you ever wondered what goes through the mind of a student nurse whenever you see a patient's relatives shouting at her for a small mistake she committed or how a male student nurse feels when he is posted to a Obstetric and Gynaecology ward?

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Here is an honest reflection from a student nurse who once thought he could make big bucks by making his way to the Middle East in the nursing field. The adventures of this male student nurse starts here. I dare you to read on...

01 | EARLY DAYS

I sat on the silver-coloured plastic chair in the examination hall, daydreaming as I waited for the invigilator to signal the last five minutes of the exam. It was June 2009 and I was sitting for the final examination of my nursing course at a local college on Penang Island, my hometown in Malaysia. It felt as though everything I had encountered the last three years happened over three days. Alright, maybe that was a little exaggerated. Nevertheless, it did feel as though it was just three weeks ago I took a small step of courage and short leap of faith to embark in the field of nursing.

One of the first persons I shared my desire with was my grandmother. She did not discourage me. Since my childhood days, she has been the one who taught me to show compassion, to love without expecting anything in return and to love those who were unlovable. Without realising it, she was actually challenging me with the question, “What good is it to love those who are easy to love?”

The next step was telling my parents. As I had expected, it was difficult to convince my parents to let me pursue my dream job, what more something that was awkward and out

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of the blue for a boy. I demanded that my parents understand me. Like most 18-year-old teenagers, I felt that they did not.

I had always assumed that my father wanted me to become an engineer because he placed so much importance on Mathematics and Science during my school years. When I told him that I wanted to be a nurse, he did not say much. My father was a man of few words and he simply told me to think over my decision carefully as nursing would be a more challenging career as compared to ‘conventional’ ones such as engineering or teaching.

My mother’s personality is the exact opposite of my father’s—she is friendly, sporting, outspoken and very *kan cheong*¹ at times. I respect her because I have realised that everything she did was for the family and to ensure that I had a bright future. I respect her because she taught me what sacrificial love was and she practices what she preached. I respect her because she is my mother.

I was not one of those brilliant students who achieved straight A1’s for the SPM examination, which is a compulsory national examination taken by all fifth-year secondary school students in Malaysia before they graduate. I managed to obtain only five A1’s and two A2’s.

To join a nursing course, you need to pass five subjects in the exam as well as your Malay and English papers. I guess

my mother was shocked when she discovered that her only son had put nursing as his number one choice. Her surprise could be due to three possible reasons:

1. Why on earth would a person who scored seven A’s for the SPM choose nursing as a career? There must be better options out there.
2. Why nursing? Does he even know what nursing is all about? Is he sure that nursing is what he really wants? What if he regrets his decision halfway through the course? He is still very young.
3. He is a man. Wouldn’t it be weird for a man to be a nurse? How much can he possibly earn?

After learning of my intention to pursue nursing, my mother wrote me a note:

“To my son Irwin,

There is no shortcut to success and your studies are your first step. To do well, you can’t just pray or hope or expect—You have to work for it and work very hard. You need to spend time on your studies—to read, to understand and to practice the exercises.

¹ *kan cheong* is a colloquial term commonly used in Malaysia and Singapore meaning ‘easily agitated’.

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If you do not use your time wisely now, you will regret it because you could have done much better had you spent more time on your studies. Time—once it has passed, it can never be recalled. Time is unforgiving and merciless and does not allow us to go back to do what we should have done but did not, or to undo what we should not have done.

So, son, use your time wisely and study hard so that you know you have done your best and will not regret it later.

Love,
Mummy”

After I read the note, my mood became very unstable. I was sad; I was raging inside. The mixture of emotions blended together to produce a bitterness that was extremely hard to digest. I was very disappointed that my mother discouraged me from joining nursing. I did not know what she was thinking at that time but I was really angry with her. I was heart-broken. Perhaps she wanted me to think through it carefully before rushing into a nursing career. Perhaps she thought I did not know what I really wanted in life as I was a teenager who had just finished secondary school. She thought I was lost and had no direction but she was wrong!

I sensed that my mother was trying to take control of my life. She wanted me to be like her—a teacher. She wanted me to have a stable job, enjoying holidays the same time as her and be near her. But I did not want to be a teacher! Yes, she is my mother and I respect her. But did she think that just because I am her son, that she can make decisions for my life? I felt that I was living the life she wanted me to live. I had to quarrel with her in order for her to consider allowing me to step into nursing.

Did anyone understand the dilemma I was facing?

For a week after she wrote the note, my mother continued trying to convince me to think thrice about entering the nursing course. She told me to consider doing Form 6 first and that I could still join the nursing course after that if my dream persisted. (In Malaysia, students can choose to do Form 6 after the SPM or apply for admission to tertiary institutions. In Penang, my hometown, it is common for students to continue to Form 6 or enrol in private colleges after taking the SPM.) She kept repeating these words to me, “Nursing is a very tough job. You will need to deal with people’s urine and shit. Your working hours will be irregular and your sleeping pattern will be upside-down. Are you sure you want to do this?”

I was terribly frustrated with my mother when she kept telling me and others that I was uncertain and unclear about what I had chosen to do. I told her, “I do not want to do

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Form 6. I am sure I want to do nursing. Why would I want to waste two more years in Form 6 when I am determined to do nursing right now, straight away?” For the first time in my 18 years so far, I quarrelled with my mother.

Finally, but reluctantly, she agreed to let me join a nursing course on one condition: she wanted me to be an observer in a hospital ward until the college offers me a sponsorship². Perhaps she was hoping I would change my mind after seeing first-hand how disgusting some of the nurses’ tasks can be.

I sobbingly said, “Okay.”

Soon, my mother brought me around the island to scout out the different colleges that offer nursing courses. There are eight hospitals on the island and the nursing colleges are located near some of these hospitals. At the first hospital we visited, we were told that the application period for admission was closed and there were no more vacancies for new students. I was told to fill in a form, after which they would contact me if there were any places available.

My next stop was at a hospital that specialises in oncology, which is the branch of medicine that deals with tumours. The hospital focused primarily on cancer patients. Unfortunately, the administration office was closed as they were observing Good Friday and Easter that day.

Finally, we went to a hospital situated in front of a nursing college. There, we met a clinical instructor, Ms Boey. She briefly explained the nursing course to us and took us on a short tour around the college. My mother remarked to her, “He is still considering. Young people tend to rush into things. He is still not sure of what he wants.”

When I heard that, my anger flared up. I was boiling inside. I wanted to climb to the top of a mountain and shout, “My mother does not understand me!” Her words were like salt on a wound in the layers of my heart.

What was my mother thinking besides “What is my son thinking?”

Faced with the ceaseless discouragement from my parents, I grew pessimistic and almost admitted defeat in the battle of applying for the nursing course. I was hesitating; I didn’t know what to do. I had lost my focus and my mind was scattered. Should I or should I not join nursing?

It was my sister, Chrystin, who urged me not to give up. She kept asking me to prepare the necessary documents and send in my letter of application. One day, I told her, “I think I don’t want to join nursing anymore.” I was bitterly hurt by my mother’s reaction and battling with the thoughts of giving up. “Why is it so hard for me just to take up a course of my choice?”

² Sponsorship refers to the college paying for a student nurse’s diploma course on the condition that the student is bonded for a number of years after graduation.

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This is the only decent picture captured with my parents during my graduation. This book is a tribute to them for supporting me, their son.

I took 10 seconds to dream and 10 years to achieve it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Irwin Choo's journey in the nursing world started in 2006 when he got his first taste of being in the medical line after securing a sponsorship to become a student nurse. Although his days as a student nurse were filled with embarrassing misadventures, funny encounters and frustrating moments, it did not deter him from chasing after his dream. He has been working in the Emergency Department since graduating from his course.

This book is the achievement of a dream Irwin has had since he was 18 years old—to be the first male nurse from Penang, Malaysia, to publish a book about the challenges a nurse faces and the different types of patients they encounter. It has always been his heart's desire to share with the world the path he had chosen, how it felt to be the odd one out and the simple gems of lessons he picked up along the way.

He hopes this book will serve as a guide to school-leavers who are interested to join nursing but have no idea about what awaits them in this career. Lastly, he wants to impact the lives of other people by inspiring them to never give up on their dreams.