

GET IT RIGHT

LEARNING TO BE A BETTER DOC

Medical progress is being made all the time, so the learning never ends for surgeon A. B. John.

He is a highly qualified doctor, specialising in ENT, which stands for ear, nose and throat. Every day, patients rely on him to make good decisions. Dr A. B. John tells us how he prepares himself for those daily challenges.

Q: You have been an ENT specialist for a long time, but are there still things you have to learn?

A: Medical progress is being made all the time. One of the things I look for is better techniques of surgery. Just a week ago, I learnt a different way of doing ear surgery that is less invasive and that allows faster recovery after surgery. In the same ear surgery course, I learnt about situations when I can use cartilage (soft elastic tissue) to close a hole in the ear drum that causes deafness or disease.

New and better drugs and newer and better equipment are constantly being invented and being tried out. A doctor must keep abreast of these developments to give his patients the best current treatment.

I also constantly learn from listening to my patients about their responses to the various individual medical and surgical treatments that I give them.

Q: Students learn about the body in their textbooks. What do you read to find new knowledge?

A: I learn by reading nowadays from internet journals. I use a website called Medscape for quick updates. I subscribe to its ENT updates.

I also subscribe to the ENT and head and neck surgery journals that are sent out monthly by publishing firms. These journals only publish studies that are of good standard. The articles are checked by internationally renowned groups of reviewers before they can be published.

Q: Where else do you find useful information?

A: I learn from medical meetings



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overseas, like the one I attended last week in South Africa. I also attend local meetings organised by hospital ENT departments, like one this coming week at Kent Ridge Hospital.

I am an International Fellow of the American Academy of Otolaryngology (ENT) – Head and Neck Surgery. This organisation sends me regular **bulletins** both digitally and by slow mail. Among these bulletins sent are guidelines for best practices in ENT. I make it a point also to attend the Academy Meetings once every two years in the United States or Canada.

There are also journal club meetings, where my colleagues in the various hospitals where I work get together to share ideas. Doctors also hold discussions about patient case studies.

Q: Nowadays, we can just type an illness like “sinus” into Google and immediately get loads of advice. Are these websites that we can actually trust?

A: What you find through an internet search engine like Google are not necessarily websites that can be trusted. See for yourself if they are all consistent in the advice they give.

It is always better to visit a website that you know is respected. You can get good advice from a website like that of the American Academy of ENT Surgery (www.entnet.org) or locally from websites

of hospitals' ENT departments, or clinic websites of experienced and well reputed ENT specialists.

You should be careful about typing a specific complaint you have, like “ear pain”, and then hoping for a correct diagnosis and the best treatment for your complaint.

A problem you notice usually does not appear on its own. An illness usually comes with several different signs, like having a sore throat, fever, feeling tired, and other signs that you may not even be aware of. That is why it is best to see a doctor who has the knowledge and training to put together all your complaints and come to a diagnosis and treatment plan.

Q: There is so much information today on how to keep healthy. But, do people sometimes just ignore health facts?

A: Very often, patients do ignore early warning signs of disease, like blood-stained phlegm or ear-blockage or a neck lump that does not go away.

Patients also persist in bad health habits like smoking, over-eating or not eating the right food and not keeping fit through regular exercise. Over time, these can develop into serious medical conditions like diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, stroke and even cancer.

LEARNING FROM DR JOHN

For many subjects, there is no such thing as cramming your brain with knowledge and hoping that this knowledge will last forever. Just as food in a supermarket has a “shelf life” – it expires and becomes worthless after a while – certain kinds of knowledge cannot be relied on forever. You have to keep refreshing it. Dr A. B. John understands this well. Even though he has already passed many difficult exams to reach where he is, the learning does not stop. Here are some tips we got from Dr John:

- When you aim to be really good at something (like netball, robotics, guitar or poetry), general knowledge is not enough. To keep up with the best and latest thinking in his subject, Dr John subscribes to specialised journals. Similarly, most subjects and activities have their own magazines or websites you can learn from.**
- Dr John does not study alone. He joins groups of experts who share ideas and experiences. Similarly, you can look for a club for your special interest – or start one.**
- Dr John says some people smoke even though they know it is bad for their health. This tells us that knowledge is important, but so is motivation and determination. Remember that as you try to improve yourself.**

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