

Guest Blog – Dr Emma Patrick

March-April 2019

Lessons from Okinawa

The Japanese word Moai – (noun) refers to:

- 1) A group of life-long friends
- 2) A social support group that forms in order to provide varying support from social, financial, health or spiritual interest

We read about the importance of wellness with increasing regularity, but what does it mean and how can we best attain it?

The 2006 World Health Organization's definition of wellness – “as an optimal state of health of individuals and groups with two focal concerns – the realization of the fullest potential of an individual physically, psychologically, socially, spiritually and economically and the fulfillment of roles and expectations-in family, community, place of worship, work, place and other settings.”

Okinawa, Japan is famous for having the oldest lived women on the planet and has a population with a low incidence of cancer and heart disease. The inhabitants have been closely observed by researchers and anthropologists to attempt to understand the complex interplay of lifestyle, diet and society that may be the reason for this longevity, and whether there is potential that these behaviours may perhaps be extrapolated into other communities with similar effect.

A year or so ago, in my seemingly never-ending quest to improve my own state of wellbeing I listened to a podcast interviewing Dan Buettner, a National Geographic Fellow and researcher who was tasked, alongside a team of researchers, to find and observe the longest-lived populations in the world and see if they could identify points of commonality. He dubbed these communities the 'Blue Zones' and I urge you to visit the Blue Zones website (<https://www.bluezones.com/>) for the findings of their research, which I believe are fascinating.

Their research came up with the “Power 9,” nine common denominators that they found in every community. These included; moving naturally within your environment, having a sense of purpose, having a predominantly plant based diet, eating until you are only 80 % full, belonging to a faith-based community, finding your right tribe, putting your loved ones first, taking time out to de-stress and sharing a glass of wine with friends.

Now clearly some of these are easier to put into action than others, but the overall theme is one of belonging within a community, friendship and taking control over what we feed ourselves, both nutritionally and spiritually.

Communal to all the Blue Zones is a sense of community. Something I personally learnt in the last year is the importance of belonging to a community and finding your “Tribe,”- people with who you can share a hobby, sport or spiritual connectivity. The Okinawans take this one step further with the tradition of Moai. As children they are paired up with other children within their village and these friends become their lifelong support outside the family construct. They meet daily or multiple times during the week and may be there for social support but also financial, welfare and bereavement support later in life. The most important factor is the understanding that there is a safety net in times of difficulty or hardship and not just with fiscal aid or relying

upon the State. Researchers have shown that if you share common values of healthy habits as well as similar life goals, you will experience less stress, be happier and live longer. Makes sense, yes? But it seems to me that in a world of seemingly endless electronic connectivity through social media most people cannot boast that they experience these benefits. Instead of improving social wellbeing, we see anxiety disorder, social phobia and isolation becoming increasingly prevalent in “Western” society.

With the establishment of the Welfare Advocates Network, I believe that we are experiencing a paradigm shift in how we view the workplace – that in our work environment we should thrive not just individually but collectively, as a community where every individual is valued. We are bringing greater awareness to the importance of Mental Health and Wellbeing through excellent resources, such as the ASA collaborative project ‘Long Lives, Healthy Workplaces’ toolkit for anaesthesia departments. This document provides a framework for assessing and recognizing areas that can be improved upon within a department and provides tools with which to implement change. Whether that is through promoting resilience training and stress reduction programs, ensuring appropriate on call rest space and rostering which allows for adequate post call recovery time, identifying when a colleague is in distress or at risk, to name but some of the recommendations.

With the use of tools such as these and others (Stanford Medical School and the Mayo Clinic also have excellent physician wellness programs) every department is afforded the opportunity to create its own thriving community. Together we are better equipped to support one another, for example through mentoring or buddy programs and ensuring new members of a department are met with regularly to “check-in.”

For many, it may not be work that is causing an issue but daily living stressors, especially as a new member of a department. Seemingly simple tasks such as knowing where to live in a new city or town, which pre-schools to choose, finding a GP or dentist etc. can only add to the stress of starting a new job. This is when a strong community minded department can provide stability, support and friendship to new colleagues but also hopefully notice when colleagues are struggling or suffering, whether it be from ill health, stress or family illness.

So, as we look to the future, I believe we can do so with optimism putting this new paradigm for how we live and work into practice. That looking for and being given the opportunity to connect meaningfully within our local and national anaesthetic communities will lead to happier and healthier workplaces.