I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to visit the world-renowned Harvard Medical School in May 2016, together with its affiliated hospitals Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, and Massachusetts General Hospital.

There, I witnessed the speed of technological advancement, and I was filled with awe. A few years back, when I was conducting laboratory experiments at a genetics centre in the United States, I learned about the Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats (CRISPR)/Cas (CRISPR-associated) systems in a laboratory meeting. CRISPR/Cas are tools used in genome engineering, such as gene editing and regulation. I could still remember how excited the whole laboratory was after the presentation, as the CRISPR systems could significantly improve the efficiency of genome modification. The CRISPR technology was just developed at that time, and only a few laboratories in the world were using it. And this time, during my attachment, I was very fortunate to experience first-hand how the CRISPR/Cas systems worked and I have learnt how to design experiments using the systems.

Apart from laboratory research, having spent time at wards and rounds in the hospitals made me realize the importance of a close doctor-patient relationship. The doctors I met all emphasized holistic care, and they paid a lot of attention to patients’ family, social background, cultural background and religion. There were even targeted training sessions for doctors, on communication skills when facing different patient populations and their families. For example, in cases of paediatric patients and their parents, the amount of information given to the child may need to be adjusted according to his or her ability to comprehend. Risks of overwhelming the child need to be balanced with empowering the child with knowledge on the condition and self-care.

The clinical experience reminds me of a quote by public health pioneer Dr. Edward Trudeau — “To cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always.” Despite breakthroughs in technology, there are still limitations of science, and not all diseases can be cured completely. While being doctors we should always try our best, at the same time we should bear in mind that what we are really treating is not the disease itself, but the patient. Comfort and hope should be offered to every patient. When I am back in Hong Kong, I will apply what I have learnt during this visit: to go the extra mile when treating patients, allow more time for them to express their concerns, and pay attention and tailor treatment to their specific needs.
Picture taken at the Ether Dome, Massachusetts General Hospital, where the first successful surgical anaesthesia in history took place. It used to be a surgical operating theatre in the 1800s, and now it is used for medical conferences and presentations.
Picture taken at Massachusetts General Hospital, one of the oldest and largest hospitals in United States.