

United as a Profession

Text by Dr Lee Yik Voon



Dr Lee is a GP practising in Macpherson. He is also a member of the current National General Practitioner Advisory Panel. He is a pet lover at heart who is the proud owner of a dog, and regularly feeds neighbourhood community cats. He also enjoys playing online war games and thinks that playing Pokemon Go is a good form of exercise.



How many of you have asked yourself these?

If you could turn back the clock, would you still want to be a doctor? Or would you go into business and take a shot at making tons of money? After all, most of you are the *crème de la crème* of students, hence pursuing any other subject should not be too difficult for you.

Some of us will give altruistic reasons – such as to save lives – for taking up medicine, while others might conclude that we are not financially savvy or mathematically sound and hence chose medicine as a career.

All of us are different. Not everyone possesses the heart to be a medical doctor. Few will want

to make sacrifices, take up the challenges and responsibilities of a healer, and disregard the rewards and perks that your friends and classmates may be enjoying in other areas of work and business.

So, did we select the right people for medical studies?

Some of us may pursue academic medicine as our career and abandon the path of monetary gains, while others may leave for the private sector and greener pastures.

When you leave to join the private sector, you need to be a businessman, shopkeeper and healer, all in one. The financial viability of your practice becomes top priority. When your medical clinic is unable to generate enough revenue, it will fail to survive.

In order to thrive, one has no choice but to have a viable business model. You will have to decide the type of medical practice you wish to run, the location, the amount of rental to pay, its operating hours, the staff to employ, the business structure to adopt and even aspects like banking and money collection methods, among many other considerations.

When I started my practice more than twenty years ago, I tapped into resources that were available to me. My close friends who started their private practices years before

me, and have done well, selflessly shared with me their secrets to success. Not only did they provide me with various case discussion opportunities, but they also helped me mould my practice.

Helpful resources

Currently, lots of help and advice are available from SMA and the College of Family Physicians Singapore. Our GPs can attend various family medicine courses to beef up and update their knowledge of family medicine, in particular the practical aspects of running a GP/family physician practice.

SMA has conducted seminars on going into private practice, sharing pearls of wisdom in the setting up and running of a medical clinic so that doctors may set right their footings, anticipate issues and adopt various available solutions instead of coming up with solutions from scratch.

Our senior officials from the Ministry of Health (MOH) deliver the regulatory component to help us stay within the law. They remind us of what to do and what not to do so that we may practise with peace of mind and sleep soundly at night. Tax and accounting consultants are also invited to share the latest news on the Singapore Budget every year.



It is important for our younger doctors to seize these opportunities. They should make time for these beneficial sessions to glean invaluable lessons from these expert speakers.

Working together during a pandemic

However, no course can prepare you for the current pandemic that we face.

Clinics may sign up as a Public Health Preparedness Clinic (PHPC). MOH, in collaboration with the professional bodies, conducts courses so that clinic staff know how to convert their regular GP clinic into a PHPC clinic during an outbreak. This will include changing the layout and modifying clinic operations.

PHPC clinics are given priority in receiving a replenishment of medicine, vaccines and supplies when they are activated.

Many pandemics or epidemics come unexpectedly. Often, we may have little information to work with in the beginning. Our experience shows us that every infectious disease outbreak is different. We have to adapt rapidly as information emerges.

In addition to that, these days we are confronted with fake news on social media which results in fear and confusion among the public

and professionals. As leaders of our community, the least we should do is to exhibit a calm composure so that we can be a beacon of light for the confused public. The last we should ever do is to add to the confusion with all kinds of conspiracy theories and half-truths.

To me, the greatest issue is the information overload. Not only do we get regular updates from MOH, we also get information from group chats, including information forwarded and reposted from various unreliable sources. Many turn out to be an individual's opinions and some are obviously fake and dubious.

I found it impossible to read through all the text messages, let alone the forwarded articles, that come in.

Doctors and other healthcare workers are human. We need to look after our comrades who are overwhelmed by the crisis. As professionals with sufficient training, we would be able to pick up those likely afflicted with mental distress. We see many trying to push the same agenda and topic in every one of their posts.

We not only need to look after our patients but also our comrades so

that we can be effective as a team to look after our nation in this outbreak. We must be preemptive and look out for signs of mental stress and distress among our colleagues.

How do we organise the private sector so that we can effectively and efficiently meet the epidemic onslaught and keep our medical community healthy to win the war? That is a huge challenge. We need to supply them with adequate effective weapons and equipment. Modern pandemic warfare requires these to keep our "soldiers" safe from disease.

We need to look into their mental health, give them sufficient rest and also help alleviate their worry for their family and loved ones.

We need to keep our Members well so that they can do their best for our patients, society and country. Everyone plays a part and we each have a unique role to play. When all of us march in synchrony, victory is assured.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you for your part as good team players so that we can overcome yet another challenge to our healthcare system.

Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, here we go again. ♦