
SMA



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Highlights
of the Evening

Citation for
Dr Ng Eng Hen

SMA ANNUAL DINNER 2026



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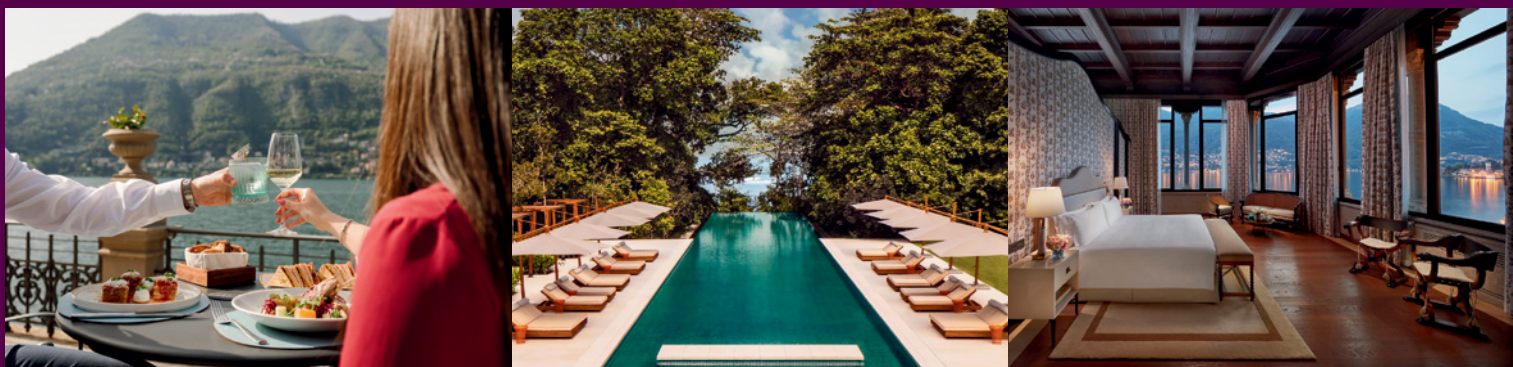
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The Editors' Musings

DR TINA TAN

Editor

Dr Tan is a psychiatrist in private practice and an alumnus of Duke-NUS Medical School. She treats mental health conditions in all age groups but has a special interest in caring for the elderly. With a love for the written word, she makes time for reading, writing and self-publishing on top of caring for her patients and loved ones.



It has been pointed out to me that newer readers may not be clear why *SMA News* features letters from our students from the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom. I drew inspiration for this column from the late Alistair Cooke, a British journalist who was well-known for his radio broadcast *Letter from America*, which detailed his life in America for BBC listeners. Having heard some of his recordings a long time ago, I felt there was a need for our readers to have some insight into the life of our medical students who are studying overseas. Our students in the UK have, in turn, shown great enthusiasm for showcasing the eye-opening experience of life abroad, the things they miss about home

(a common theme is the food), and of course, their medical training. Thus, our Letters from the UK series was born.

Then there is also the fact that the SMA Annual Dinner is always a fun-filled event to attend, even though I like to tell people that, for me, I have to work for part of it due to my responsibilities as a Council member. For the enjoyment of our readers, may I direct you to the speech given by our President Dr Daniel Lee Hsien Chieh (see page 12), the Citation for our Guest of Honour Dr Ng Eng Hen by A/Prof Prema Raj (see page 14), and last but not least, Dr Ng's heartwarming and humorous musings delivered that evening (see page 16).

DR YAP QI ROU

Guest Editor

Dr Yap is a medical officer currently rotating through Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. In her free time, she likes to travel, watch Netflix and explore new cafes with her friends.



Attending the SMA Annual Dinner this year was a much welcome pause from the hectic pace of clinical work. It was my first time attending, and the evening offered more than just opportunities to meet new people and catch up with familiar faces. It also allowed us a moment to reflect on the broader forces shaping our profession.

From the vantage point of a junior doctor, our daily focus is naturally on the immediate needs of our patients – what are my differentials, what medications do I order or stop? Discussions on broader topics can sometimes feel a tad removed from the immediacy of our daily practice. Dr Daniel Lee Hsien Chieh's speech on the evolving challenges in healthcare, particularly around healthcare financing, medical inflation and insurance regulation gives us a gentle reminder that each and everyone has their part to play in developing and maintaining the sustainability of healthcare in Singapore.

A common theme of the night which I am sure resonated deeply with all of us was trust. Our patients' trust in us, our trust in our fellow colleagues and our Government. Dr Ng Eng Hen's reflections on his own personal journey showed us that trust is not just important in politics or systems but also in everyday interactions, helping us foster a strong doctor-patient relationship and improving the consistency of our healthcare.

Once a medical student myself, I also am heartened to hear about the great, continued efforts to support students who aspire to pursue medicine, through incentives such as the SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund. Being a doctor is a calling and should not be limited by financial circumstances, and such efforts ensure the profession remains open to those with the ability and commitment to serve.

Finally, I would like to thank all who attended and contributed to the evening. As we look forward, I wish everyone a meaningful and rewarding year ahead! ♦

Welcome Aboard



Dr Ivan Low is a military medical officer serving in the Singapore Navy and an A&E senior resident in Singapore Health Services. At the current stage of his career, he finds himself balancing both ends of the spectrum – keeping sailors healthy and operationally effective on one hand, and resuscitating critically ill patients on the other.

He has been serving on the SMA Council and Doctors-in-Training Committee since 2020, and is passionate about medical education and junior doctor support. When not replying emails, he can be found relaxing at the park with his loved ones, his dog and a cup of *kopi c peng* (*siew dai*).

The SMA News Editorial Board, led by Editor Dr Tina Tan and Deputy Editor Dr Chie Zhi Ying, meets regularly to discuss the latest topics relevant to the profession and how best to invite and publish articles on these topics to inform, educate and update our Members. To find out more about our Editorial Board members and our work, visit <https://www.sma.org.sg/page/About-SMA-News> or scan the QR code.



A CELEBRATION OF CAMARADERIE:

SMA ANNUAL DINNER 2026

Text by Hidayah Sunaryo, Editorial Executive

Friends, colleagues and distinguished guests alike convened for this year's rendition of the SMA Annual Dinner on 23 May at Conrad Singapore Orchard. The Royal Pavilion Ballroom bustled with conviviality as attendees exchanged pleasantries, looking forward to an evening of warm fellowship and celebration.

The Guest of Honour for the evening was Dr Ng Eng Hen, former Minister for Defence. Other distinguished guests in attendance included Dr Syed Harun Alhabsyi, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Ministry of Education and Ministry of National Development, and Member of Parliament for Nee Soon GRC; Dr Hamid Razak, Member of Parliament for West Coast-Jurong West GRC; Dr Hareesh Singaraju, Nominated Member of Parliament; and Datuk Dr Thirunavukarasu Rajoo, President of the Malaysian Medical Association.

SMA President Dr Daniel Lee Hsieh began the dinner with a warm introduction for Dr Ng Eng Hen. Dr Lee then gave his welcome address (see

page 12), in which he discussed healthcare financing and medical inflation. He also reiterated the importance of the duty of care and the profession's commitment to prioritise patients' best interests.

SMA Honorary Membership

The SMA Honorary Membership was instituted in 1969 and is the highest honour that SMA can bestow on persons who are distinguished in public life or who have rendered meritorious service to the medical profession or to the Association.

This year, SMA conferred this accolade upon Dr Ng Eng Hen. A/Prof Prema Raj, a childhood friend of Dr Ng, delivered the heartwarming citation (see page 14). A/Prof Prema shared personal anecdotes of Dr Ng's early days in school and in medicine, highlighting an unswerving character of dedication, responsibility and humility that would serve his patients and the nation well in years to come. A/Prof Prema noted that those who knew Dr Ng as a young boy might not have expected that he would one day become a surgical oncologist

and Minister for Defence, but they would agree without hesitation that he would grow up to become someone deeply dedicated to the people entrusted to his care.

Dr Lee then presented the SMA Honorary Membership award to Dr Ng. Following the presentation, Dr Ng expressed his thanks and delivered his Guest of Honour address (see page 16). In his speech, he highlighted the value and importance of trust in cultivating robust medical systems and society at large, especially in an era with increasingly eroded trust.

Commemorating compassion

Advocacy is a key pillar of SMA's ethos and the Association could not have come this far without the support of our dedicated volunteers and donors over the years. Over the course of the evening, a series of awards were presented in recognition and thanks to individuals who have demonstrated their commitment to advancing SMA's mission and contributing to the continued development of the medical profession and Singapore healthcare.

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SMA Merit Award

The SMA Merit Awards were presented to four recipients who had made significant contributions to SMA and the medical profession, or in social service to the community.

Prof Fong Kok Yong is deputy group CEO (Medical and Clinical Services) of Singapore Health Services and senior consultant at the Department of Rheumatology and Immunology at Singapore General Hospital. Throughout his career, Prof Fong has made great strides in shaping clinical governance and advancing the field of rheumatology in Singapore. SMA presented the Merit Award to Prof Fong in recognition of his dedication and contributions to autoimmune disease care, academic medicine and national healthcare leadership.

Dr Angel Lee Onn Kei is group medical director at St Andrew's Mission Hospital and Singapore Anglican Community Services. Dr Lee played a pivotal role in establishing and enhancing inpatient palliative care services, playing a key role in developing national guidelines and quality frameworks and advocating for dignity in ageing and end-of-life care, bridging clinical excellence with policy, education and systemic healthcare improvements. SMA presented the Merit Award to Dr Lee in recognition

of her significant contributions to the medical profession.

Dr Lim Wee Kiak is an ophthalmologist as well as the co-founder and vice chairman of Eagle Eye Centre. Dr Lim was also a Member of Parliament from 2006 to 2025, during which he represented and served the division of Canberra in Sembawang GRC, championing healthcare affordability, the needs of an ageing population and fiscal prudence in medical spending. SMA presented the Merit Award to Dr Lim in recognition of his contributions to the medical profession and his distinguished public service.

Adj Asst Prof Mok Ying Ren is a sports surgery consultant at National University Health System and a member of Anti-Doping Singapore's governing board. Prof Mok is a decorated former national athlete, having won two gold medals at the Southeast Asian Games (triathlon in 2007; marathon in 2013) as well as being a seven-time Singapore Marathon champion during his competitive career. SMA presented the Merit Award to Adj Asst Prof Mok in recognition of his dedication to medicine and outstanding sporting achievements.

The next step for SMACF

Dr Chong Yeh Woei, Chairperson of the SMA Charity Fund (SMACF), then took to the stage to share about the charity's latest fundraising campaign, "The Next

White Coat" (see page 19 for further details). Following which, the new SMACF corporate video was unveiled, featuring beneficiaries of the charity. To find out more about how you can lend a hand in uplifting needy medical students, please visit <https://www.smacf.org.sg>.

With the dinner in full swing, guests moved freely from table to table, mingling and catching up with peers old and new, as toasts were made and waffles were snapped. Guest of Honour Dr Ng Eng Hen was also spotted in spirited conversation with fellow attendees.

Appreciation for our volunteers

Dr Daniel Lee returned onstage to introduce the 67th SMA Council. As the evening continued, more awards were given out in celebration of individuals' efforts and dedication towards the Association as well as towards the medical profession and research.

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SMA ANNUAL DINNER

2026

5



SMA ANNUAL DINNER

2026

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SMA Long Service Award

The SMA Long Service Award serves to appreciate individuals who have contributed their time and services to the SMA Council and committees. A big thank you to all awardees for your hard work and support of the Association!

30 years of service

Dr Chong Yeh Woei: SMA Council (1998–2020); SMA President (2009–2012); SMACF Chairman (since 2019)

Adj Prof Tan Sze Wee: SMA Council (since 1996); SMACF (2013–2021); SMA Pte Ltd Chairman (2011–2012; since 2014)

20 years of service

Dr Allen Wang: SMA Complaints Committee (since 2006)

Dr Wee Siew Bock: SMA Complaints Committee (since 2006)

Prof Teo Eng Kiong: *Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ)* Editorial Board (since 2006)

Dr N V Ramani: *SMJ* Editorial Board (since 2006)

Adj A/Prof Benedict Tan Chi'-Loong: *SMJ* Editorial Board (since 2006)

10 years of service

Dr Chie Zhi Ying: *SMA News* Editorial Board (since 2016); SMA Council (since 2020); SMACF (since 2022)

Adj A/Prof Ng Chew Lip: Doctors-in-Training Committee (since 2016); SMA Council (since 2018); SMACF (since 2022)



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Dr Tan Li Hoon: SMJ Editorial Board (since 2016)

Dr Ganesh Ramalingam: SMA Whiskey Chapter (since 2016)

Dr Felix Li Jingxiang: SMA Whiskey Chapter (since 2016)

Dr Tan Pinhong: Volleyball, SMA Sports and Games Committee (since 2016)

Adj A/Prof Vishal G Shelat: SMA Centre for Medical Ethics and Professionalism (SMA CMEP) (since 2016)

Dr Jamie Zhou: SMA CMEP (since 2016)

Staff

Noor Azliena Bte Samhudi: Senior Executive, Membership Services, 30 years of service

Priseillia D/O Govindasamy: Executive, Membership Services and Council Support, 5 years of service

SMJ Best Research Paper Award

The SMJ Best Research Paper Award has been presented since 2004, with the aim to encourage the publication of high quality local and international research papers within the SMJ and to promote



Legend

1. The 67th SMA Council

2. Merit Award recipient Prof Fong Kok Yong receiving his award from Dr Ng Eng Hen

3. Merit Award recipient Dr Angel Lee Onn Kei receiving her award from Dr Ng Eng Hen

4. Dr Chong Yeh Woei introducing SMACF's latest campaign

5. Merit Award recipient Dr Lim Wee Kiak receiving his award from Dr Ng Eng Hen

6. Merit Award recipient Adj Asst Prof Mok Ying Ren receiving his award from Dr Ng Eng Hen

7. 30-year Long Service Award recipients with SMA President (L to R: Dr Chong Yeh Woei, Dr Daniel Lee, Adj Prof Tan Sze Wee)

8. 20-year Long Service Award recipients with SMA President (L to R: Dr Allen Wang, Dr N V Ramani, Dr Daniel Lee, Dr Wee Siew Bock, Adj A/Prof Benedict Tan Chi'-Loong)

9. A wifie before the dinner starts

10. 10-year Long Service Award recipients with SMA 1st Vice President Dr Ng Chee Kwan

and recognise local and regional researchers for their achievements. The top three research papers of 2025 were selected from 43 original articles published in 2025. *SMJ* past Editor-in-Chief and Honorary Advisor Adj Prof Poh Kian Keong presented the commemorative trophies and certificates to representatives from the following papers.

Dr Leong Zhou Hao and team:

“A machine learning approach for the diagnosis of obstructive sleep apnoea using oximetry, demographic and anthropometric data” (April 2025)

Dr Mark Tan Bangwei and team:

“Use of deep learning model for paediatric elbow radiograph binomial classification: initial experience, performance and lessons learnt” (April 2025)

Dr Chua Yan Ting and team:

“Disparities in ethnicity and metabolic disease burden in referrals to nephrology” (June 2025)

We congratulate the authors and recipients of the above awards and encourage more quality submissions to *SMJ*!

In gratitude to all

All too soon, it was time for the night to end. The 67th SMA Council would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Dr Ng Eng Hen for gracing the event, and to all guests for taking the time to join us at the 2026 SMA Annual Dinner. We hope everyone had an enjoyable evening and we look forward to welcoming you again at the next Annual Dinner! ♦

Legend

- 11. Capturing memories of the evening
- 12. *SMJ* Best Research Paper Award representatives with *SMJ* Honorary Advisor (L to R: Dr Mark Tan Bangwei, Adj Prof Poh Kian Keong, Dr Chua Yan Ting)
- 13. Catching up with longtime colleagues
- 14. A toast to celebrate the evening
- 15. SMA Council Members with President of the Malaysian Medical Association Datuk Dr Thirunavukarasu Rajoo (second from left)
- 16. One more group photo to round off the night



GP Education Series

Advancing Primary Care Through Multidisciplinary Perspectives

This GP Education Series brings together experts from diverse specialties to provide practical, evidence-based insights into key healthcare challenges encountered in primary care. Through multidisciplinary discussions on topics ranging from cancer prevention and management to holistic approaches to midlife health, participants will gain updated knowledge, strengthen collaborative care practices, and enhance their ability to deliver comprehensive, patient-centred care.

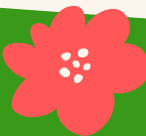
Liver Cancer Awareness – Multidisciplinary Approach

10 October 2026 | Saturday | 1.30 pm to 4 pm

Webinar via Zoom | 2 CME points

Complimentary for SMA Members

- Risk factors for liver cancer and screening
- Interventional radiology's role in multidisciplinary management of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC)
- Surgical management of HCC – Advances and progress
- Systemic therapy and immunotherapy for HCC
- Liver transplant in HCC – Singapore landscape
- Liver cancer multidisciplinary meeting



Beyond Hormones: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Midlife Women's Health*

24 October 2026, Saturday | 1.20 pm to 4 pm

Webinar via Zoom | 2 CME points

Complimentary for ALL doctors

- A patient's menopause story
- The modern management of menopause: What every primary care doctor should know
- Reclaiming sexual health: Addressing urogenital and emotional needs in midlife women
- Pelvic health in practice: Managing pain, prolapse and incontinence in midlife and beyond

*This webinar is sponsored by Abbott.

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PRESIDENT'S WELCOME ADDRESS

Text by Dr Daniel Lee Hsien Chieh



Dr Ng Eng Hen, ladies and gentlemen, a very good evening.

Dr Ng is no stranger to us, having worked in Singapore General Hospital and then in the private sector, both successfully; all of us remember his leadership and steady hands as Singapore's Minister for Defence from 2011 to 2025, and prior to that, Minister for Education from 2008 to 2011. Dr Ng's career is a masterclass in leadership. From his clinical mastery in surgery to analytical rigour and finesse in political strategy, he also has stirring oratory skills as well as a formidable vocabulary which I can only aspire to. Dr Ng has been a beacon for our profession. We are honoured to have Dr Ng as our Guest of Honour and Honorary Member tonight. While you have taken a 25-year break from us to pursue a political career, you remain one of us, Dr Ng.

As a public health physician who started out in internal medicine at Changi General Hospital (CGH), I am privileged to have experienced operating a for-profit acute private hospital and then now running the largest group of not-for-profit nursing homes in the long-term care sector. I am humbled to address you this evening as President of the 67th SMA Council, in a time when multiple common challenges face our

profession and the patients whom we serve, one of which has drawn wide concerns – medical inflation.

But before I do that, let me say a few words about myself. I am a graduate of the local medical school and father of three girls. Obviously, I am trichologically challenged because I think and worry too much. I have been in the SMA Council for 14 years and I was an internal medicine trainee who switched to public health. When I decided to make that switch, I was sent by my boss Prof Teo Eng Kiong to see a public health physician in CGH for counselling. He tried his best to dissuade me but obviously he failed, and tonight he is being punished by having to spend the entire dinner at my table. No prizes for guessing as to who that handsome man is.

But let us return to regular programming. The topic of healthcare financing and medical inflation is a complex one. There are many factors driving healthcare costs in Singapore: ageing population, utilisation trends, changes in disease epidemiologies and consumption behaviour, earlier detection of diseases, technological and pharmaceutical advancements, health insurance design, doctors' professional fees, operating expenses driven by real estate prices, healthcare manpower shortages, hospital facility fees – the list goes on. Multiple stakeholders are

involved: payors (consumers, insurers, Government), providers (doctors, hospitals) and patients. In Singapore, the Ministry of Health (MOH) regulates doctors and hospitals whereas the Monetary Authority of Singapore is the regulator for insurance companies. Medical inflation will always be with us. The question is how much.

The Health Insurance Task Force was formed in 2016 and subsequently the Multilateral Healthcare Insurance Committee formed in 2021. A variety of effective measures have since been implemented. In 2018, MOH introduced surgeon fee benchmarks for 200 common surgical procedures on the Table of Surgical Procedures. In 2020, the benchmarks were extended to include anaesthetist fees and doctors' inpatient attendance fees. Since its introduction, close to 90% of doctors have been charging within the recommended surgeon fee benchmarks. The outcomes were effective as intended – the average annual growth in private surgeon fees has slowed dramatically from 3% between 2010 and 2018 to just 0.4% from 2019 to 2023. In addition, MOH has since also introduced hospital fee benchmarks for common surgical procedures and medical conditions. We await outcomes in this regard that will move the needle.

To address rising insurance premiums and private healthcare costs, MOH also introduced new requirements for Integrated Shield Plan (IP) riders. From 1 April 2026, new IP riders sold are no longer permitted to cover the minimum IP deductibles set by MOH. The co-payment cap has also been raised to a minimum of \$6,000. We are heartened that with these measures, it was reported that newly launched IP riders are on average 30% less costly than older ones.

Yet in the same breath alongside the above adjustments, *The Business Times* (BT) reported on 1 April 2026 that five in seven IP insurers had raised the premiums of their base IP plans, and for some, the premium hikes are in the double digits.¹ Based on underwriting results for 2024, four insurers were in the red. BT reported that the most profitable was Prudential, which reported an underwriting profit of around \$25 million. Even the most consistently profitable insurer, Prudential, is raising the base IP premiums for its private hospital and Class A plans. AIA Singapore and Great Eastern were the only two insurers that did not raise premiums.

Past SMA President Dr Ng Chee Kwan wrote to the *Straits Times* Forum on 15 April and informed that between 2019 and 2024, IP insurers kept their overall medical loss ratio (MLR) between 69% and 77%.² This is the percentage of premium income that insurers pay out in medical claims. According to Dr Ng, generally an insurer with a lower MLR has a higher share of income remaining after paying medical claims, to use for administrative costs such as salaries and overheads. In contrast, in the US, MLRs are typically 80% to 85% or higher depending on market segment – small or large group markets. Under the Affordable Care Act in the US, if an insurance company fails to meet these required percentages for a given year, they are legally required to refund the excess premium amount back to the consumer.

Having spent some time in the long-term care sector in Singapore, I have observed a similar transparency

requirement – the Charities Act regulates that the amount of fundraising expenses should not exceed 30% of the total gross funds raised in a financial year. That means to say at least 70% of the total funds raised should directly support the charity's causes and beneficiaries. This is known as the 70/30 fundraising efficiency ratio. This rule applies to all registered charities and Institutions of a Public Character in Singapore. If a charity anticipates exceeding this limit, they must be prepared to justify the high expenses to the Commissioner of Charities.

We must recognise that the context of healthcare in the US or of the not-for-profit fundraising work by charities is different from the for-profit context in which the private health insurance industry in Singapore is placed to function. Having said that, I wonder if there can be any learning points for us to consider. The challenge of medical inflation is multifactorial and cannot be attributed to a single reason alone. All hands must be on deck and work in good faith to manage medical cost inflation and ensure sustainability – that includes regulators, payors, providers and patients.

At the same time, it must be noted that the two groups – the medical profession and the insurance industry – operate on two different paradigms. We owe our patients a duty of care which puts the patient's interests before our own, and while we must provide our patients with viable options, we also advise what we think is the best option for the patient. The patient makes a decision with this knowledge. In contrast, the insurance industry works on the "suitability standard" where agents provide options to their customer which they think are contextually and reasonably suitable. This difference has been highlighted in a joint letter with the Academy of Medicine, Singapore to the *Straits Times* Forum recently.³

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, SMA's slogan is "For Doctors, For Patients" – this reflects our recognition that the doctor-patient relationship lies at the heart of any scientific revelation, technological innovation, policy decision

and business practice that affects healthcare, as well as our commitment to protect this relationship and what we always owe our patients – the duty of care.

As doctors who know our patients' medical history, risk factors and family context, we are uniquely placed to advise patients on their likely healthcare needs over time, whether this relates to chronic disease management, hospitalisation risks or preventive care. In an increasingly complex practice environment, I urge all of us in the profession to take on the mantle of physician-leadership, now more than ever, and be beacons of our patients' best interests!

Thank you and have a wonderful evening ahead. ♦

Further readings

1. *New Fee Benchmarks for Private Healthcare Sector*. In: Ministry of Health. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3QxcnqD>. Accessed 10 June 2026.
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1. Cua G. *Some IP insurers hike premiums of base plans for private hospital and A-class wards*. *The Business Times* [Internet]. 1 April 2026. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3PH115Q>.
2. Ng CK. *Forum: Way to ensure that insurance premiums are justified*. *The Straits Times* [Internet]. 15 April 2026. Available at: <https://bit.ly/49v4sjO>.
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CITATION FOR DR NG ENG HEN

Text by A/Prof Prema Raj



Dr Daniel Lee – SMA President, Dr Ng Eng Hen, Prof Ivy, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, colleagues and friends, good evening. It is both an honour and a deeply personal privilege to introduce tonight's award recipient, Dr Ng Eng Hen.

Unwavering character

Before I begin formally, permit me a brief reflection. Eng Hen and I go back a very long way – to our days in primary school where, in retrospect, we were already being quietly forged for the demands of later life.

In those early years, within the smouldering battlegrounds where destinies were tested and survival hung in the balance, in the dangerous pit where life was decided – also known more commonly as recess time in the school quadrangle – we were shaped by discipline, tested in resilience, and trained – though we did not yet know it – in the arts of strategy, survival and response under pressure.

These formative exercises took two principal forms. The first was a game known as “Hantam Bola”, where one learned, quite viscerally, the importance of anticipation, agility and avoiding incoming threats. The second was “Police and Thief”, which refined our instincts in pursuit, escape and the delicate balance between risk and timing.

Fortunately, I am pleased to report that survival rates in those early training exercises were generally high.

In fact, it was “Hantam Bola” that first brought Eng Hen and me together at a friend's house in Primary Five where we met for the very first time over what I can only describe as a highly competitive introduction. I am not entirely sure you remember that day. But I can tell you with complete certainty it left a mark on me.

It is tempting, therefore, to conclude that Eng Hen's later responsibilities in matters of defence and strategy were not entirely unforeseen. But beyond these early “training grounds”, what has truly remained constant through the years is something far more important: his **character**.

Many Singaporeans know Dr Ng as the nation's long-serving Minister for Defence, guiding Singapore through an increasingly complex global security environment. Others know him as a highly respected breast oncological surgeon, whose work touched countless patients and families.

As we prepared for tonight, we tried very hard to locate old photographs of Eng Hen from his student days and from his years as a surgeon. Unfortunately, despite considerable effort, the archives did not quite cooperate. But perhaps that is fitting.

Because in this room, among doctors, we do not really need reminding of

who Eng Hen was in medicine. He is already deeply imprinted in our collective memory as one of our own – a colleague, a surgeon, a physician shaped by the same wards, disciplines, anxieties and callings that shaped all of us.

The photographs we truly need tonight are not the ones that bring us back to medicine, but the ones that remind us how extraordinarily far beyond medicine his journey eventually carried him – from the hospital ward and OT to leading Singapore's national defence and strategic future. And perhaps that remarkable journey was not entirely unforeseen. But for me, Eng Hen is something else as well. He is a lifelong friend.

What strikes me most when I look back across those many years is something quite remarkable: his character has never wavered. The same qualities we saw in him as a young boy – steadiness, dedication, humility and quiet determination – are the very qualities that shaped his life and career.

Before the Cabinet table and the diplomatic stage, Eng Hen was first and foremost a doctor – one of us. Trained at the National University of Singapore and graduating in 1982 (with a distinction in social medicine and public health), he became a surgeon in December 1986 and later

a surgical oncologist specialising in breast cancer and surgical nutrition. He also trained at MD Anderson Cancer Center and Cornell University in the US between 1990 and 1992 under the Health Manpower Development Plan programme.

Caring for patients who face one of the most difficult diagnoses in medicine, oncology demands not only technical excellence but empathy, patience and the ability to stand beside patients through fear and uncertainty.

One of my clearest memories of Eng Hen comes from our time working together in paediatric surgery in 1986 at Singapore General Hospital. I remember nights in the ICU when a child was critically ill. Many of us would review the charts, check the vitals and return later. But Eng Hen was different.

He would sit quietly by the bedside – sometimes through the entire night when not attending to other patients – watching, thinking and searching for every possible way to help that child survive with the surgical intensive care manual by T.E. Oh in front of him.

It was not dramatic. It was not for show. It was simply who he was.

That moment left a deep impression on me. It set a benchmark for what dedication to a patient could truly look like. And if you look at the arc of Eng Hen's life, that same spirit never changed.

Whether as a surgeon, a minister, or a national leader, he approached every responsibility with the same determination – to do the work thoroughly, thoughtfully and with a deep sense of duty and empathy.

On the world stage and at home

After entering politics in 2001, he served Singapore in several key roles before becoming Minister for Defence, a position he held with distinction for many years. Under his leadership, Singapore strengthened its defence capabilities and deepened strategic partnerships around the world.

His service has been recognised with numerous international honours, including France's Legion of Honour and the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, acknowledging his contributions to strengthening defence ties between Singapore and these nations as well as his valuable contributions to international defence cooperation. But medals and titles, impressive as they are, tell only part of the story.

Because beyond the achievements, Eng Hen remains what he has always been: a good and loyal friend, a warm and thoughtful person, and someone whose success never distanced him from the people around him.

He is also a devoted husband to Ivy, father to four outstanding children, and grandfather to five lovely grandchildren – a reminder that even in a life filled with immense responsibility, the most important roles remain the ones closest to home, and he has always remained grounded in relationships that truly matter.

And perhaps that is why his leadership has always carried a human touch. The compassion we saw in the hospital wards; the loyalty we saw in friendship; the steadiness we saw since childhood; those same qualities carried forward into a life of public service.

And when you know someone for as long as I have known Eng Hen – from primary school to today – you begin to understand something clearly.

Through the course of life, achievements accumulate. Roles may change. Responsibilities grow. But character reveals itself early. And in Eng Hen's case, it has remained remarkably constant.

At first glance, this photo of Eng Hen's run is simply a picture of a man exercising. But in many ways, I think it reveals something deeper. Because when you strip away the office, the titles, the medals and the public image, what remains is the same quality that has always defined him: determination, discipline and the refusal to give less than his very best to the task before him. Even through pain he keeps moving forward.

He has always been the same person – steady, thoughtful, dedicated and determined, and deeply committed to the people entrusted to his care, whether they were patients in the hospital ward, soldiers serving the nation, or citizens looking for leadership. Here I quote a post he made on social media: "I think running is like life. Different challenges come your way, and you have to change pace or even style, but you keep on the road to do what brings you satisfaction and fulfilment."

In fact, if you had asked those of us who knew him as a boy whether we imagined he would one day become a surgical oncologist and then go on to become Singapore's Minister for Defence, the honest answer would probably have been no.

But if you had asked whether he would grow up to become someone deeply dedicated to the people entrusted to his care, the answer would have been yes – without hesitation.

Conferment

Tonight, SMA honours him not only for what he has achieved, but for the spirit with which he has served – first as a doctor, and later as a leader of the nation. And for those of us who have known him a long time, it is especially meaningful to see that life of service recognised.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming a doctor, a surgeon, a statesman, a loyal friend, a husband, a father and a grandpa – but most importantly a man whose character has remained constant through the years: Dr Ng Eng Hen. ♦

GUEST OF HONOUR'S SPEECH

Text by Dr Ng Eng Hen



I would like to thank the SMA President, its Council members and all who are here tonight. You honour me with this award and your presence.

We could have dispensed with formalities. Good *zi char* and beer at a local coffeeshop would have suited me just fine – even preferred. But having worked in defence establishments for many years, I know that traditions build esprit de corps and so I am happy to join all of you at this SMA Annual Dinner.

I want to thank A/Prof Prema Raj for his kind words. I am proud of what A/Prof Prema Raj has accomplished to advance transplant surgery in Singapore. Our generation might live to see the day that organ transplants are as common as artificial joint replacements. In time to come, what he and other pioneers have begun in Singapore will reap bountiful harvests.

A life in politics and medicine

The SMA has honoured me, but I am not quite sure what I did for the medical community to deserve this award. Let me reveal a snippet of my political life tonight not commonly known. When I was approached to enter political office in 2001, I had a specific request of the Prime Minister then – that I would not be sent to the Ministry of Health (MOH). It was a request, not a condition. But thankfully, then and subsequent PMs that I have served acceded to my wish, so I was never deployed to MOH in all 24 years of my political office. You are probably wondering why I avoided MOH.

The simple reason is that I have too many friends in healthcare, particularly doctors. I even married one – who led Singapore Health Services for more than a decade! And I know that running a healthcare system, in the context of governing Singapore to ensure both

affordability and a sustainable health budget, means difficult decisions. Patients' needs are paramount and to meet those needs, healthcare workers are in my mind among the most dedicated, altruistic and hardworking of professionals. Despite this, healthcare systems globally are always challenged with inadequate resources – manpower particularly.

And so I thought, better for me to stay out of MOH to serve other Ministries instead and leave MOH to more intrepid souls. Some of you might conclude that I chose the easier path. Perhaps, but as my unionist friends would say in Hokkien – *jit lang jit pua, kan cheng buay sua*. Loosely translated for tonight – to keep relations cordial, you keep to your half and I will keep to mine. That strategy seems to have worked. Despite keeping away from healthcare, SMA has decided to bestow on me tonight's award. I take it then that you prefer benign neglect to

meddlesome midwifery from doctors-turned-politicians.

I spent about half of my adult life in medicine – most of that in Singapore General Hospital, and only about four years in private practice – and the other half in politics, about 20-plus years for each. Which I suppose puts me in a respectable position to compare the two – medicine versus politics, the doctor versus the politician. So for tonight's speech, let me share a few reflections on these two different arenas.

Reflections on healing society

The doctor deals with the patient in front of you with his/her family – that sacrosanct relationship defines and scopes the doctor's responsibility and accountability. This is hardly the case for the politician who gets to see the underbelly of society. For the political servant-leader and his/her constituent, the terms of engagement are anything but simple or scoped. I once had a mother and adolescent son at my Meet-the-People Session. I can still picture them – both had numerous tattoos and the mother looked deeply troubled. They needed financial help, which we gave to alleviate some day-to-day needs. The mother then confided that her main worry was that this son would end up in jail. You see, her husband and three older children were already in jail. She too had been just released from prison, and she wanted in earnest to avoid that plight for this remaining son. As doctors, we are taught to tackle the root causes of ills, but how do you deal with social challenges for this family?

What are the fundamentals which can alleviate social ills and elevate society, for those who aspire to be a doctor to heal the nation or our world? After 24 years in political office, my conclusion may surprise you because it sounds somewhat simplistic – here it is anyway. Good medicine to build healthy nations requires basic but pure elements. And the most important element?

Trust. Trust is intangible but so very substantive. It is ephemeral but its effects, both good and damaging when trust is lost can last a lifetime. The late George Schultz, a US Secretary of State who served two US presidents and was a long-time friend of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, penned an essay when he turned 100 in 2020.¹ He wrote, "Trust is the coin of the realm. When trust was in the room, whatever room, the office room, the government room, or the military room – good things happened. When trust was not in the room, good things did not happen. Everything else is details." The distilled essence and wisdom from a statesman who lived to tell it all at 100 years is worth listening to. But honestly – is trust that important in real life? Surely, there are more powerful forces at play?

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a paper was published in the *Lancet* in 2022.² The purpose of that study was straightforward. The investigators wanted to establish from this truly global event the main factors that impacted infections and deaths. They input data from 177 countries globally – reliable datasets, not just reported but comparing excess deaths, so that unreported ones could not be hidden. Multivariate analysis and regressions were performed on a range of parameters that influenced the outcome. The findings were illuminating. As expected, factors such as age structure of societies, mean population body mass index, geography (living below 100 m) and gross domestic product per capita affected infection and death rates. But across systems that varied widely in socioeconomic systems, cultures, forms of government, healthcare systems and capacity, what came out as a "persistent and substantive" influence? Yes, trust. The higher the trust in government and among people, the better the outcome. You would think that countries with greater healthcare capacity or pandemic preparedness would have performed better – they did not. If trust was lacking, the results were poor. Trust, an intangible quality led to fewer real infections. The papers' authors

did an extrapolation – if all countries improved trust in government to the level of approximately the 75th percentile of measured countries, there would have been 12.9% fewer global infections. Similarly, if all countries improved interpersonal trust to the 75th percentile of measured countries, the effect would be even larger, 40.3% fewer global infections would have occurred. Astonishing real-world findings about the power of trust!

Erosion and rebuilding of trust

Trust takes years to form and seconds to break. Each day in your clinics or hospitals where you faithfully tend to each patient, keeping high standards, doing research to better outcomes; you build up a reservoir of trust that lasts – it explains why some of you remain as primary physicians to more than one generation within families.

How does believing and building trust in our relations with others – whether family, friends, patients or clients, fellow workers or neighbours – sit in a world that is increasingly going the other way? In the last two decades, trust has been eroded enormously. The global financial crisis of 2008 transferred private to public debt, but few were deemed accountable for the fallout. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed many countries deeper into debt and lives were unnecessarily lost, because people did not trust what they were told, even by their leaders. The wealth gap between rich and poor is widening globally, across and within countries. I have heard ministers from the Pacific Islands openly declare at public fora that they have given up hoping that the developed world will help them. They have lost faith and trust, yes that word again, as communities vanish when islands become submerged. The Global South is similarly despondent with the lack of aid. In this decade, trust between communities and even among allies has broken.

Instead, the currency of the day seems to be power and leverage for

self-advancement, never mind if the global commons for the good of all are damaged as a consequence. "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must," a maxim born out of a power-based and cruel antiquity has reasserted itself in our day and age. In this kind of world, can trust gain any traction? It seems almost naive to believe in principles, let alone rules to govern relations between countries. Building trust in today's milieu seems outdated and irrelevant.

I would argue quietly the reverse. Because trust is in short supply, those who can engender trust command a premium. This is true, whether it is building trust within your family, your friends and colleagues, your communities, the society and world we live in. Do not misunderstand me –

building trust when others are grabbing power and possessions is not cost-free. Indeed, it will be costly. Secretary Schultz said that when trust is not in the room, good things do not happen. I agree with him. We must expect that the next decade or two, hopefully not longer, will become more troubled and difficult for all countries.

We are in a historical cycle where geopolitics has swung the way of increasing rivalry dominated by self-interest. As in the past, each generation must find out for themselves at a painful cost that this approach is self-defeating in the longer run. Hopefully then, our world will revert to one built on trust and mutual benefits. Our biggest investment therefore amid all the ongoing disruption and disintegration is to build trust now, among ourselves within

Singapore and with other trusted partners outside.

I wish the SMA and all of you fulfilling lives that enrich your families and the communities you live in. Thank you again for this SMA Honorary Membership. ♦

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HIGHLIGHTS

From the Honorary Secretary

Report by Adj A/Prof Ng Chew Lip

Adj A/Prof Ng is an ENT consultant in public service. After a day of doctoring and cajoling the kids at home to finish their food, his idea of relaxation is watching a drama serial with his lovely wife and occasionally throwing some paint on a canvas.



Letter to the *Straits Times* Forum on health insurance

In a letter to the *Straits Times* Forum, past SMA President Dr Ng Chee Kwan highlighted that rising Integrated Shield Plan (IP) premiums reflect broader healthcare cost pressures, from ageing populations to expensive treatments. He notes that measures by the Ministry of Health and insurers have helped to keep costs in check, with the medical loss ratio serving as a key gauge of fair pricing. Recent moves to increase patient co-payments may further curb claims, but he also stressed that keeping premiums affordable is crucial to sustaining private healthcare use and easing strain on the public system.

The Forum letter was published on 15 April 2026 and can be viewed at: <https://bit.ly/49v4sjO>.

Joint SMA-AMS letter to the *Straits Times* Forum on medical and financial advice

As IP premiums rise amid broader coverage, consumers are encouraged to take a more active role in understanding their health insurance options. SMA and the Academy of Medicine, Singapore (AMS) highlighted in a joint letter to the *Straits Times* Forum the importance of seeking holistic medical advice from doctors – whose primary duty is patient welfare – alongside financial guidance from advisers, whose recommendations are based on suitability standards. Patients should recognise these differing perspectives when making healthcare and insurance decisions for themselves and their families.

The joint SMA-AMS Forum letter was published on 11 May 2026 and can be viewed at: <https://bit.ly/4fkoLEk>. ◆

Framing the Tapestry

Text by Christic Moral and Lye Ting Yin



Christic is a second-year medical student at King's College London and is the outgoing editor of SMSUK.



Lye Ting is a first-year medical student at Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, and is the incoming editor of SMSUK.



Almost as quickly as it started, the academic year has begun drawing to a close. With it comes a chance to reflect on and celebrate our growth as we look forward to what lies beyond this milestone. The Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom (SMSUK) welcomed the incoming committee at our SMSUK Annual Dinner, marking the beginning of a new chapter. In this edition of Letters from the UK, incoming SMSUK editor Lye Ting and I look back on the past year.

On change and growth

Christic: Hey Lye Ting! It has been almost nine months since you first joined SMSUK at our orientation camp! It feels like it was just yesterday that we were at the Changi chalets getting to know each other and, of course, trying to solve that puzzling murder mystery in our little group. How has the past year been?

Lye Ting: It has been great! It seems so surreal that just nine months ago, you were one of my orientation group leaders giving me advice about living in London, and now we are having this letter exchange as the incoming and outgoing editors. Time has really flown by!

My first year of medical school was a year of many firsts: my first time living alone in East London, my first patient encounters and my first time joining a sports society. Through all these firsts, I have experienced small gestures of kindness, small insights into my own character and even small observations that offer me new perspectives. These have had a noticeable impact on me.

I also remember feeling hesitant as I walked into my first patient encounter. The few communication skills classes I had did little to make me feel prepared for a real home visit. When I knocked on the patient's door, I was worried about the little things: how to introduce myself, whether to take off my shoes and whether it was polite to sit down. But after a few minutes of chatting with the patient and his family, I soon became enraptured by a deep look at his personal history and how that influenced and converged with his health. Patient visits have since become my favourite part of my medical curriculum. I saw many patients, from people who suffered debilitating strokes to former addicts, living happy, contented lives thanks to strong family support, showing me the incredible resilience that humans can have in surmounting disease and disability.

Compared to last September, I am both more optimistic and confident when treading into uncharted waters, and I am excited to see what the next chapters of my life in London will bring. What about you? How has this last year treated you?

Christic: That is lovely to hear! The transition to living overseas and starting university can be so difficult, but it does come with its lessons. Personally, I often struggle to see how much things change, especially when it seems almost like a fact now that time passes by more quickly every year. If I relied solely on intuition, I would be certain that I have only just started my second year in medical school, and that far too little has changed for eight months to have passed. My impending examinations tell me otherwise, reminding me that we are at the end of the academic year. Sometimes, change happens so slowly that you almost do not notice it, especially when it happens in small steps. This year, I have been taking things more slowly, finally letting go of my yearly habit of telling myself that this will be the time I figure everything out. Counterintuitively, removing these goals might have been my biggest step forward. Instead of big goals with many moving parts, I have found that focusing on smaller systems that are easy to act on has been infinitely simpler to stick with. This way, it is no longer about the end goal, but about doing something, anything that helps, because starting is often the hardest part.

Looking back, I see that the small changes do add up, despite how difficult they are to see. This year, I started having weekly placements at a general practice and a hospital. The countless hours of lessons on communication and history taking in the first year could not have prepared me enough for the experience of actually speaking to my first patient. When a consultant assigned each student a patient to collect a history from, I secretly hoped that our silence would convince her to let us go in a group. Of course, that never happened, and I began my century-long (actually three minutes) wait outside the ward door waiting for the nurses to leave. This cued what might be the most rigid and awkward history-taking known to those hospital wards – a neatly arranged conversation fitting into the boxes I drew in my notebook to remember the different components of a history. From where I am now, I have almost forgotten what that experience had been like, as the countless opportunities to speak with patients, each teaching a small but valuable lesson, have nearly dispelled that awkwardness. For me, easing the pressure to reach perfectly defined goals that were set before knowing the path to get there has given me more opportunities to grow. Besides all the things you have learnt, I am sure you have also had a host of new experiences this past year. Which of these memories is the most meaningful to you?



Photo: SMSUK

Moments that defined our year

Lye Ting: I experienced so many new things this year, so it is quite impossible to choose just one memory as my favourite! However, I started rowing for the first time in university, and my favourite memory was rowing in the United Hospitals Head Race with my novice team.

This race was the highlight of the competitive season, and it was a time trial between the rowing clubs of London's five medical schools. With a thrilling 4.4 km long course down the River Thames, this was a battle of endurance. After months of training while battling hour-long commutes to the boathouse, we were ready to compete for the medals.

However, as we started rowing, disaster struck. A logistical error meant that we had to row without speakers towards the start line, and the coxswain¹ had to rely on his voice alone to relay his directions to the rowers. This was often not loud enough, leaving us confused and late to execute many commands to steer the boat. Yet it was in this chaos that we found camaraderie. We decided to all echo the coxswain's commands loudly to ensure everyone was on the same page. We were all in the same boat, rowing in tandem to manoeuvre the boat safely, slowly building confidence and trust in each other.

When it was finally our turn to start racing, our spirits were high. As the race went on, our muscles ached and our lungs burned, but we stayed motivated, loudly cheering each other on. It took us 15 long minutes to finally cross the finish line and we still had a lengthy paddle back to the boathouse on tired arms and legs. Spontaneously, someone suggested, "Let's put some music on," and we began to sing Katy Perry and Carly Rae Jepsen songs a cappella. As I sang along with my friends, my body momentarily forgot its fatigue and I had the widest smile on my face.

We ended up winning the novice category, even besting multiple intermediate crews on time. Notwithstanding our success, it was this sense of brotherhood on the water that made this race so memorable. Joining rowing has been, without a doubt, my best decision this past year, and I have found a second family with the club. How about you?



Photo: Lye Ting Yin

Christic: I have to say that despite all the chaos, that sounds like such a fun experience, and maybe that is my cue to try something new next year. Like you said, it is hard to think of just one memory to share, but one that sticks out to me was SMSUK's weekend trip to Tenerife. Despite not having seen some of my friends for months and having struggled to find time to catch up amid our busy schedules, seeing each other felt like we had not been apart for even a day. Besides having a million new stories to tell each other, the jokes we made and the quirks in our conversation all remained the same. Honestly, looking back, the trip reminds me much more strongly of the times we spent together and the jokes and conversations we shared, than of the destination or the things we actually did. It was a great reminder that even when things change, we can be grateful for the fact that some things stay the same.



Photo: Lye Ting Yin

Looking ahead

Christic: A year ago, we wrote a similar edition of Letters from the UK in which I looked back on the past year as well. Last year, I chose not to make any specific plans for my holidays, instead prioritising time for my friends and family. Knowing that this is my last full summer break, with my future ones getting shorter, I think that becomes all the more important. But I also think that, by virtue of change and the ways in which my loved ones and I have grown over the past year, we will have even more to experience together. Lye Ting, what are you looking forward to in the summer break and beyond?

Lye Ting: My friends and family, of course! I have not been home since September, and I look forward to spending some quality time with friends and family, hopefully over a good bowl of chilli *ban mian*! I also look forward to the SMSUK orientation camp this summer! I made many close friends through orientation last year, and I am looking forward to helping out as a senior and meeting friends, both old and new!

Taking up the role of editor will not be an easy feat, but I am optimistic to see what this role will bring me. Our members have unique experiences and insights, which is why I am really excited to continue celebrating their stories in future editions of Letters from the UK. To all SMSUK members reading this, I cannot wait to hear from you! ♦

Note

1. Coxswain: a steersman of a racing shell who usually directs the rowers.

Legend

1. The outgoing 31st Committee at our Annual Dinner
2. Lye Ting's Novice Team after racing United Hospitals Head
3. Lye Ting rowing with his team on the River Thames

A Look *Back*

From health insurance to artificial intelligence usage, changes in the profession abound. Amid our bustling days, let us take a moment to pause and take stock of our progress. Are there new goals you are striving for, or have you experienced any challenges that caused you to realign your efforts?

We welcome your reflections on recent years – send us your thoughts at news@sma.org.sg today!



The Next White Coat -

Every Coat
Tells a Story



Text by Sharmilah Banu, Executive, SMA Charity Fund

As we step into another year of giving, we are proud to launch our new campaign, "The Next White Coat".

For every medical student, the white coat is more than fabric. It is the symbol of a lifelong dream, the tangible mark of years of dedication, sacrifice and unwavering resolve. Yet, for many, that dream can feel fragile. Financial challenges, personal obstacles and unforeseen pressures can make the white coat seem just out of reach.

This is where donors and their impact come in. A donation, no matter the amount, is the very hand that steadies a student as he/she takes the next steps toward his/her calling. It is the encouragement that allows him/her to focus on learning and to eventually stand proudly in their white coat, ready to serve.

Through the SMA Charity Fund (SMACF), your generosity turns uncertainty into opportunity. To date, more than \$5 million has been raised, over 566 bursaries have been awarded and more than \$3.55 million has been disbursed. Every bursary represents a student whose path has been made clearer, whose burden has been eased and whose potential is being realised.

This year, as we brainstormed ideas for our new campaign, "The Next White Coat" immediately felt right. For a student, donning that white coat is one

of the most significant milestones in his/her journey. As a donor, you have the opportunity to be the bridge that turns his/her ambition into reality.

To show our gratitude for your invaluable support, we recognise our donors through meaningful acknowledgements:

All donations from \$150 and above will receive:

- An SMACF exclusive donor gift

Donations from \$12,000 to \$30,000 (supporting two to five students) will receive:

- An SMACF exclusive donor gift
- Recognition on SMACF's website and annual report
- Invitation to SMA Annual Dinner and SMA Members' Appreciation Night

Donations from \$36,000 to \$48,000 (supporting six to eight students) will receive:

- An SMACF exclusive donor gift
- Named bursaries in collaboration with SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund
- Recognition on SMACF's website and annual report
- Invitation to SMA Annual Dinner and SMA Members' Appreciation Night
- Invitation to SMACF Bursary Recipients' Engagement Event

By supporting "The Next White Coat", you are doing more than funding education – you are making dreams wearable, tangible and real. You are giving students the courage to step into the future they have long imagined, one white coat at a time. ♦

To learn more or to donate to our cause, please visit <https://www.smacf.org.sg> or reach out to us at smacf@sma.org.sg.



Travelling to Italy



Text and photos by Dr Chie Zhi Ying

It has been quite some time since my family and I travelled and it was after great deliberation that we settled on where we would like to travel to. It was late spring and Italy appealed to us from the long list of travel destinations with her beautiful churches and iconic architecture. I concede that I do not have the flair for planning free and easy trips, so, hoping for a hassle-free holiday, we opted for a guided tour package.

Prior to the trip, I pre-empted my elderly parents that there would be an extensive amount of walking – advice gleaned online has always mentioned training one's stamina when travelling to Europe. Luckily, since both of them have always been exercising and walking daily, they were unperturbed by the fact that there would be lots of walking. This advice mentally prepared us for the long walking journey that was to come when we started our tour.

With much anticipation and excitement, off we went on this trip to explore different parts of Italy!

Rome, Vatican City and Pisa

After flying through different time zones, we finally arrived in Rome, the capital of Italy, and started an intensive day tour of the city. Our local tour guide was a young Italian man who spoke enthusiastically about Rome and its glorious past. As we neared the Colosseum, we were awed by its grandeur set against the azure blue sky. I instantly felt like I was transported back to ancient times, where gladiators battled for their lives against other gladiators or beasts like lions, bears and elephants for competition and entertainment.

As we walked on pebbled stone pavements, we took in the sights of the remnants of the Roman Empire with its significant landmarks like the Roman Forum and Palatine Hill, which were the centres of ancient Rome's politics and residence. We were simply amazed by how well preserved the architecture was and how far-reaching an impact the ancient Romans had on our modern civilisation and society!

The Trevi Fountain was our next stop, which was really hard to get close to as there were throngs of tourists snapping pictures around it. The carvings and craftsmanship were simply mind-blowing, featuring the god Oceanus surrounded by Triton and other figures symbolising water's power and the seasons. As is tradition, we tossed a coin over our shoulders – this is purported to ensure a return to Rome.





Taking a break from the walking, we took our lunch in a scenic cafe near the Trevi Fountain, where we had some simple spaghetti and coffee. After lunch, we hopped onto the famous steep Spanish Steps, a favourite meeting point of ancient Romans, and hurried through winding cobbled streets to get to our coach bus.

Arriving at the Vatican City, we were greeted by the majestic sight of St Peter's Basilica, the largest church in the world and a Renaissance architectural masterpiece. The breathtaking dome is a global religious landmark and a testament to Christian faith and art, leaving thousands of visitors inspired by its artistic magnificence. As we stepped onto the colourfully marbled floor of the Basilica, we admired the intricate mosaics, sculptures and gilding, with Latin inscriptions honouring saints and angels. The equally iconic St Peter's Square features a large central obelisk and surrounding colonnades, which are sure to leave you awestruck for a long time. It was simply a spiritual journey of self-discovery, strength and faith!

After a good night's rest where our legs were aching from the day's extensive walking, we were off to Pisa. We walked through winding cobbled streets again before being greeted by the famous Piazza del Duomo and the imposing cathedral and baptistry. Next thing we knew, we were adeptly



snapping photos in the vicinity of the Leaning Tower of Pisa! There is a variety of ways in which you can picture yourself with the tower in the backdrop: pushing against it, propping it up, putting it on your palm, pointing to its apex with the tip of your index finger and many more. It was so much fun looking at the iconic tower with its unintended lean due to the unstable soft soil foundation. Who would have expected that it would become a world-famous icon because of this? We finished the day with a sumptuous dinner of deliciously roasted chicken drumsticks, pizzas and spaghetti with red wine, before going into our hotel for the night's rest.

Florence, Venice and Milan

The next day, we popped over to Florence where we visited San Gimignano, a picturesque medieval Tuscan hilltop town and a UNESCO World Heritage site. As we walked up the hilltop, we took in the scenic sights around us with its panoramic view of the greenery and vibrant flora merging effortlessly with the ancient historical architecture around it. Once home to many towers built by rival families to flaunt wealth, the town now has only a few towers remaining and it has become a unique tourist destination. It is as if you have stepped right into a scenic postcard, with friendly locals selling souvenirs, ice cream and fashionable items, and al fresco cafes dotting the

area. You will see people strolling leisurely, coffee or ice cream in hand, walking their pet dogs through the winding cobbled streets. Amid this beauty, I felt that time had stopped, the hustle and woes of city life all forgotten. One could spend the whole day sipping on coffee, enjoying a simple lunch leisurely while taking in the spectacular scenery around. This was truly an incomparable holiday!

Coming to Florence, one must not miss the Piazza della Signoria with its delicate sculptures. We marvelled at the famous Fountain of Neptune with its serene water elements and the Palazzo Vecchio, a historic town hall and symbol of Florence. In the masterful craftsmanship of the sculptures, one



sees the strength, resilience, wisdom and beauty of gods, saints and heroes who contributed to the betterment of their fellow men. We had some retail therapy where we shopped at one of the outlets – a great way to look at the latest fashions, grab a bite and have some rest after the sightseeing.

Continuing on our journey, we were off to Venice, the world-renowned city of canals. Against the sunny weather, we hopped onto a private water taxi which gave us time to admire the sights of the city’s charming monuments. We admired the monumental Bridge of Sighs, the remarkable Doge’s Palace as well as the regal Piazza San Marco. There was also the iconic Rialto Bridge, the oldest of four bridges spanning the Grand Canal in Venice. Standing atop the bridges basking in the sunny and windy weather, the serenity was indescribable and simply welcoming.

Venice is well known for its extraordinary glass masterpieces, and what better way to have a peek at the secrets of Murano glass-making techniques than seeing its glassblowing show? With skills and mastery, Venetian craftsmen gracefully moulded hot molten glass, used special tools to imprint patterns and shapes and blew it to make elaborate glass pieces in the likeness of horses, lamps and cups within a few minutes. The audience clapped enthusiastically in admiration of this closely guarded secret of glass-making. We then visited the glass-making factory and shop, where we were struck by the diversity of glass items and pieces on display. The glass pieces were intricately

designed in vibrant colours – it was simply delightful!

Of course, what is a trip to Venice without taking a ride on the iconic gondola? The ride was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – we wound around quaint houses along the canal covered with thick moss and mould due to chronic exposure to seawater and admired beautifully carved bridges, houses and the intricate network of canals, all while aboard the ornately built gondola. As the gondolier skilfully glided us down the winding canals, he serenaded us with a rich barcarole, a traditional folk song which added to the romantic and tranquil ambience. What a mind-blowing experience!

Our last stop in Italy was Milan, the global fashion capital known for its high-end luxury fashion brands like Versace, Prada, Gucci and Armani. We visited the Castello Sforzesco, a medieval castle and fortress built in the 15th century housing several masterpieces by Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. In the vicinity, one could not help but be impressed by the stately architecture of La Scala Opera House, Galleria Vittorio and Emanuele and Duomo di Milan. We shopped at the Galleria Vittorio, one of the world’s oldest shopping centres with high-end luxury brands, fine dining restaurants and historic cafes – a perfect way to unwind and indulge!

Memorable from start to end

Alas, time flies and it was soon time for us to return home. Looking back, the trip was truly an eye-opening visual

feast where we got to immerse in the rich Italian and ancient Roman culture, leaving us totally in awe of world-class icons and architecture. Notwithstanding the extensive walking, we felt welcomed by the hospitality of friendly Italian people who made our trip memorable and we relished our time in Italy thoroughly.

The travel to Italy marked the start of our journey to explore Europe in a leisurely and fun way, and I am sure that I will be back soon for another family trip again! ♦

Dr Chie is a consultant family medicine specialist working in NHG Polyclinics. She also holds a Master of Public Health from the National University of Singapore and is a Fellow of the Royal Society for Public Health. She enjoys freelance writing and has written for Chinese dailies *Lianhe Zaobao*, *Shin Min Daily News* and health magazine *Health No. 1*.



Legend

1. St Peter's Basilica
2. Fountain of Neptune, Florence
3. Yummy pizza at restaurant in Florence
4. The Colosseum
5. Me posing with the Leaning Tower of Pisa
6. Glass pieces at Venice
7. Enjoying the ride on a Gondola, Venice
8. Castello Sforzesco, Milan



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