

A Letter to My Fellow Physicians

– *Stand Up and Be Counted*

By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

Dear fellow doctors,

Health Minister Gan Kim Yong has announced a fundamental review of the healthcare system. While he has focused on healthcare financing, financing cannot be considered divorced from delivery. Incentives drive behaviour and how we pay impacts what we do. Hence, what is actually happening is a review of the entire healthcare system. “Stand up and be counted” should be our collective rallying call for at least three reasons.

1. Experience and insights

We as doctors stand on the front line of the battle for health every day and are intimately familiar with how policies translate into behaviour for both providers and patients. We should share our perspectives and enrich the debate. The recent weeks have been encouraging. Doctors Tan Wu Meng, Loke Wai Chiong, Lingaraj Krishna and many others have contributed commentaries to various newspapers and offered thoughtful viewpoints, which I hope policymakers will consider carefully. I was invited to a medical student presentation last week, during which the students shared their very impressive work on a survey of Singaporeans’ healthcare financing knowledge and perceptions.

We physicians have a rich heritage of political and policy involvement, and can count amongst our forebears, activists such as Sun Yat-sen and Albert Schweitzer. The name Rudolf Virchow would be familiar to all as an eminent pathologist, but Dr Virchow also led a campaign for compulsory meat inspection in Berlin and was the architect of the city’s sewage system.

2. Voice of the patients

This phrase is incredibly paternalistic, which I concede. However, unlike in many developed countries where patient advocacy is established and effective, the landscape in Singapore is very different. Patient groups are typically

limited to social support and fundraising to help members with little policy input. While my heart goes out to the affected, I also wonder why no one appears to be asking (at least publicly) what the appropriate policy position should be. Should replacement therapy “on demand” in haemophiliacs be eligible for Medisave withdrawals? What about prophylactic treatment? Where should the line be drawn? What about patients requiring Herceptin or one of the newer targeted therapies? Rather than being confined to fundraising, should doctors also be active advocates? Until patient advocacy becomes firmly established in Singapore, I would submit that doctors have a role, perhaps even a duty, to advocate for our patients.

3. “New eyes, new solutions”

On the walls of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) is a quote from Albert Einstein: “No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it”. Minister Gan has announced a review but there are no details yet on how the review will be conducted. We should heed what we teach students in LKYSPP and urge the Health Ministry to find a different “consciousness” – an internal review will likely not be terribly “fundamental”.

I hope all of us contribute constructively to this process. It’s our system... and our country too.

P.S. As SMA prides itself as the “Voice of the Profession”, I hope they will be proactive and represent actively, both publicly and privately, the views of the profession. SMA can do so much as a platform for views, as an aggregator of opinions and as THE voice for doctors today and tomorrow. **SMA**



Dr Jeremy Lim is Principal Consultant, Insights Health Associates. He has taken to blogging (<http://insightshealthassociates.wordpress.com>) and writing a regular column on health policy to contribute to the ongoing health system review in Today newspaper.

