

9th SMA House Officers' Seminar Opening Address

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin

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Dear colleagues,

This is the third year I am speaking on this occasion. Beginning housemanship is usually a time of great happiness and anticipation. This seminar is a passing of age rite, which we have organised for many years. I organised the first one with my friends in 1996, I believe, in the Medical Alumni auditorium. We have upgraded it since to hotels and your goodie bags are well stocked with many useful things.

But this year, it is different, as you all know.

I will just deal with three things. The first is discipline. Some say SARS is an invisible enemy that kills. I like to look at it from another angle: SARS demands perfect discipline. You are not like us. You are still fresh and you have not picked up bad habits like us. So, for your own sake, your family's sake, do not pick up bad infection control habits. You will be perfectly disciplined and fastidious in your infection control habits. You will wear your masks at all times. Equally important, you will wear it correctly, and you will take it off correctly. The same methodical perfection applies to your goggles, gowns and hand washing. You will NOT rush from patient to patient, and you will take your time even if the pager has rung for the 20th time. Discipline is the first prerequisite, without which, you cannot even begin to tackle the second issue, which is fear.

It is normal to be fearful. But you will learn to control fear and cope with it. All those wonderful things you had said in the Medicine interviews in NUS (National University of Singapore) five years ago about Medicine being a calling – now is the time to make good what you said. I tell my mother the same thing. Since you chose Medicine, you would have psychologically prepared yourself for such a moment. That is why Medicine is a calling and not a job. I also walk the wards, A&E, etc, and I am exposed to risks. But that is part of the job.

Finally, after you have learnt to cope with your fear, you have to keep up morale – your very important role in all this as incoming housemen. We have been at this for more than a month. You are the first reinforcements, fresh faces that we have received in a long time. You bring capability, continuity, and above all, hope. You must not break. All the nurses and admin support staff have worked their butts off and then, beyond that. They look up to doctors to set the pace. If we crack, everyone down the line cracks. We must bear up. But we will give you the protection, psychological support, and the rest you need.

Forgive me for being sombre today. Some of you would have been taught by Dr Alex Chao who passed away this Tuesday (22 April 2003), probably from SARS. He was my cousin, and we had good times together. He would have wanted me to say this to all of you.

With that, I would like to welcome you formally to the medical profession in its darkest moment. But I am confident it is also our finest hour, as long as we have discipline, control our fear, and uphold morale.

Thank you. **SMA**