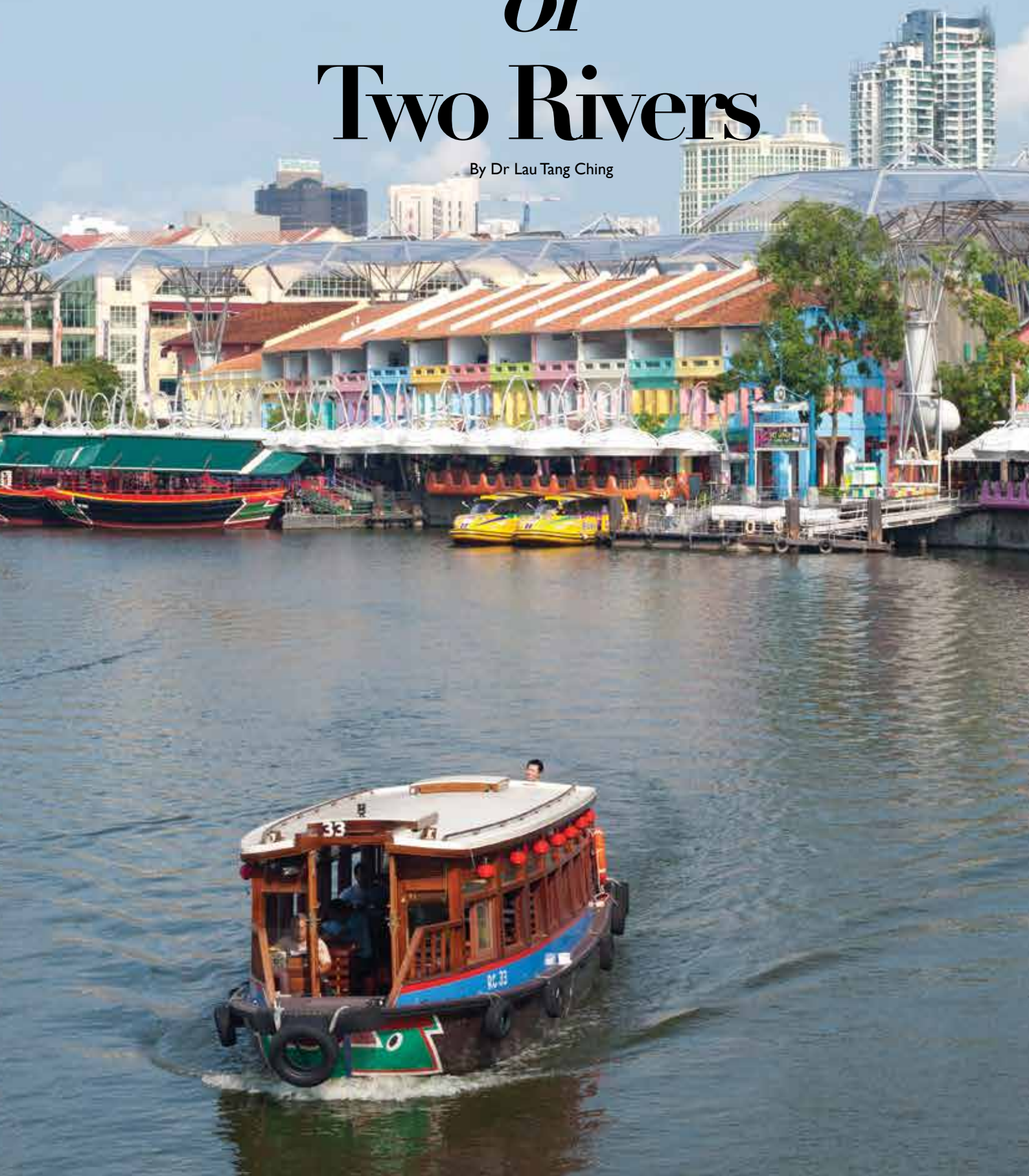


A Tale *of* Two Rivers

By Dr Lau Tang Ching





The Singapore River today

Let me tell you a tale of two rivers. The first river is the Singapore River; the river that was the cradle of Singapore's economy in her formative years. Many of us are familiar with the story as we may have lived through that period during our earlier years. The clean-up of the Singapore River was nothing short of a miracle, as the river was really polluted in the 70s. Many of us remember the stench when we walked near the river, and the occasional animal carcasses that floated by if we were to look at the river carefully. In 1977, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, then the Prime Minister, gave Singapore a vision: "It should be a way of life to keep the water clean, to keep every stream, every culvert, every rivulet, free from unnecessary pollution. In ten years, let us have fishing in the Singapore River and fishing in the Kallang River. It can be done." The economic imperative for Singapore then was obvious: we needed a clean environment to attract foreign investments to boost the economy.

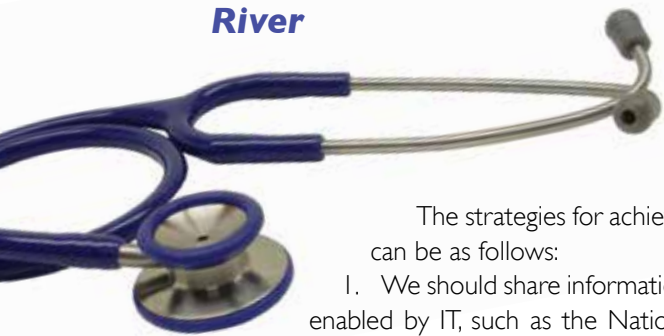
Cleaning up the river was no easy feat. Activities which polluted the Singapore River had to be stopped. The river needed to be cleaned, which would involve removing debris from the water and dredging up contaminated material from the riverbed. To achieve this, unprecedented coordination between the relevant government agencies was imperative. 12 government agencies were involved in the river clean-up, including the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of National Development, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Communications and Information, Ministry of Law, and Housing Development Board.

The hands-on work on the river began. Rubbish was removed and the riverbed was dredged. Businesses and residents were resettled. After a lot of hard work, we finally have the Singapore River and Marina Bay of today.

The story of the second river is even closer to our hearts. It is the river of life, the river that is made up of everyone in Singapore. Each of us is like a raindrop when we are born. We then coalesce into streams during our childhood and teenage years, and eventually we flow into the main stream. We rush through the river of life in adulthood, contributing to the economy of Singapore, just as the Singapore River gushes through the commerce belt of Clarke Quay and Raffles Place. Eventually, we slow down in our older years, just as the Singapore River slows as she flows into Marina Bay. With modern technology like the Marina Barrage, the water in the Singapore River lingers a bit longer, before flowing into the sea. Likewise, with modern Medicine, many of us can live longer, before eventually, we too flow into the ocean of eternity.

The Singapore River of yesteryear relied on a leader's vision to clean her up. Similarly, the river of life also deserves a vision for developing a better integrated healthcare system in Singapore: "It should be a way of life to keep healthcare integrated, every individual, every family, every community, every region to be free from fragmentation of care and unmet care. In ten years, let us have long and healthy lives with peace of mind for everyone in Singapore. It can be done." The health and social imperative for this vision is without dispute. Everyone desires to live a long and healthy life. The social and economic imperative is also obvious. A healthy population will enhance the economy of Singapore. Furthermore, a cost-effective and efficient healthcare system can be a model of care for other countries to emulate as well.

Achieving a river of life is similar to the clean-up of the Singapore River



The strategies for achieving this vision can be as follows:

1. We should share information. This can be enabled by IT, such as the National Electronic Health Record, which will eventually involve both public and private healthcare providers.
2. We should have risk stratification of needs. People who are well can maintain and improve their health by improving health literacy, and adopting healthy lifestyles. Those with chronic illnesses can avoid complications by adhering to protocol-based care, and receiving empowerment via self-management programmes. Those who present with complications can reduce morbidity through proper case management and good community care.
3. We should make our choices in healthcare provisions based on value. What do healthy individuals, patients, healthcare providers and funders of healthcare really value respectively? We may value the same things after all.
4. We ought to be outcome focused, again enabled by IT.
5. The important outcomes of this vision include better quality of life, greater social and economic impact.
6. We should encourage cost-effective healthcare funding, based on what we really value.
7. We should reduce healthcare wastage by avoiding unnecessary investigations and ineffective treatments, or treatments that do not meet the needs of our patients.

Achieving this vision for the river of life is similar to the clean-up of the Singapore River. We need collaboration among various agencies in Singapore. For the health and social aspects, the Ministry of Health; Ministry of Health Holdings; Ministry of Social and Family Development; Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth; Ministry of Education, Health Promotion Board; Agency for Integrated Care, Health Sciences Authority, regional health clusters, voluntary welfare organisations, and other groups have to work together. If we consider the aspects of infrastructure and economics, the Land Transport Authority, Housing Development Board, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Trade and Industry, and so on will be involved as well.

One key area of work will be the removal of harmful toxins from the river; and replace them with the balm that heals. We must remove the silo mentality that breeds risk transference, and aversion to sharing resources and

information. Remove the “I win, you lose” attitude and replace it with the collaborative mentality that promotes collective risk-taking, synergistic sharing and winning-together attitude. We must resist the temptation to concentrate on short term outputs which may not lead to desired results. Instead, we should have a long term outcome focus. We must purge the wrong mindsets about health and illness from Singaporeans, and improve health literacy to inculcate the right mindsets that will lead to right behaviour and better health. Finally, we must build relationships that are based on mutual care, and not just mutual transactions.

We have heard of patient-centred care being superior to provider-centred care. There is perhaps a better way – relationship-centred care. We can develop genuine and strong relationships between patients, their families, the healthcare providers or agencies, and the larger community. These relationships can form the basis of a mutual care model for the local healthcare sector.

It took a lot of grit and hard work for the dirty Singapore River to be cleaned up, to become the beautiful river it is today. Likewise, it will take a lot of grit and hard work to have an integrated and improved healthcare system.

One of the key minds behind the clean-up of the Singapore River was Mr Lee Ek Tieng, Chairman of the Public Utilities Board from 1978 to 2000. In an interview published in the *Straits Times* (ST) on 28 November 2011, he was quoted as saying with a grin: “Many of my friends told me, ‘Look, you’re in for a hard time, you know. It’s cheaper to buy fish and put them in the river every week.’” Well, we are very fortunate that Mr Lee was not afraid of a “hard time”, or we would not have a pristine Singapore River today.

Many of us are at the midpoint of our lives, perhaps give or take ten years. We are likely to have another 20 to 30 years of working life ahead of us. Like Mr Lee, I am certain that all of us are not afraid of hard times in our work, especially if it is the right work, done the right way, and for the right reason. The vision of an integrated healthcare system in our country, which is value-based and outcome focused, built on strong relationships between the stakeholders for relationship-centred care, is the right reason. If we put our hands to the plough and work collaboratively, we might, we might just see this in ST in the year 2023: “Singapore ranked number one in the world for having the best healthcare system”. It can be done! **SMA**



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