



SMA representatives Dr Chong Yeh Woei and Dr Tammy Chan with AMA President Dr Steve Hambleton

AMA National Conference 2014

– Lessons for the Future

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Photos by Australian Medical Association

FOR THE past few years, I have been attending the Australian Medical Association (AMA) National Conference, held annually in May. Through the meetings and conversations I had with Australian doctors over time, I have realised that we can learn a lot from their experiences. Although the Australian medical system is fundamentally different from Singapore's in terms of funding, the challenges that they face are very similar to what we experience in our healthcare system. In some aspects, the problems and difficulties they are agonising over serve as a crystal ball, reflecting the issues we will be grappling with in the future.

The way the AMA National Conferences are organised is also very interesting and reflective of domestic politics Down Under. I remember attending my first AMA conference in 2007, when the Labor Party, led by Kevin Rudd, was in the ascendancy against the Liberal/National coalition headed by John Howard. Then, AMA invited the Health Minister, Tony Abbott, and the Labor Shadow Health Minister, Nicola Roxon, for a debate in front of the house. They locked horns in a fiery showdown. You could see that Abbott's body language was hostile, and his verbal language just short of being totally derogatory. Roxon is a trade union lawyer by profession and sank her fangs into him like a pit bull.

After the hour-long slugfest, the doctors all charged for the microphone and lined up to ask more questions. The rough and tumble of Australian domestic politics was amazing. As foreign guests, we had ringside seats, and were very happy to watch a heavyweight boxing match up close – the only thing missing was the popcorn!

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This year's AMA National Conference, held at the National Convention Centre in Canberra, was abuzz with the recently released details of the budget under the leadership of current Prime Minister Tony Abbott. The main issue was not just the spending cuts but also the introduction of a copayment to the Australian health system. Presently when a patient sees a GP, the latter can charge a recommended fee of A\$73. The patient will then receive a reimbursement of A\$36.30 from the universal health coverage scheme, called Medicare. Quite a number of GPs do not charge the difference or the "gap fee" between the recommended fee and the reimbursement. This practice is also called "bulk billing". In fact, data presented to us showed that out of 115 million services rendered annually, 82% were charged through bulk billing.

I spoke to a number of GPs present at the meeting, and discovered that those who practised in more affluent areas would have approximately 40% of patients who paid the full recommended fees and the rest were bulk billed. But clinics in poorer places would bulk bill 100% of patients. There were also GP clinic chains that bulk billed all their patients and increased revenues by ordering lab tests and radiological imaging.

The patient copayment proposed, set at A\$7, extends to all GP consults, lab tests and radiological imaging. In the case of GP consults, the copayment is also accompanied by an A\$5 drop in the reimbursement to A\$31.30.

In a land of entitlements, the introduction of copayments has evoked a firestorm. The idea is universally abhorrent, with dissenting forces involving doctors, patients and the opposition calling the scheme a tax and decrying it as a measure that will penalise the lower socio-economic classes, pensioners and children. There was a health economist whose views were more balanced. Although she agreed with some of the critics' arguments, she felt that copayments could reduce demand and abuse of the Australian healthcare system.

In Singapore, copayments have been a fixture in the healthcare landscape for decades. I recall that they were first introduced in 1959, when the then nascent government under Mr Lee Kuan Yew took over the polyclinics from the colonial masters and imposed a copayment of 50 cents per visit. We have found them useful in reducing moral hazards and the buffet syndrome of health consumption. However, the copayment concept has worked well in Singapore as our tax rates here are lower compared to Australia, and we do have more disposable income.

On a lighter note, I met the President of the British Medical Association (BMA) who was also an invited guest. He is none other than Sir Sabaratnam Arulkumaran. Most of us will remember him as Prof Arul from Kangaroo Hospital (KKH), and he was my clinical tutor during my medical student days. He later succeeded Prof SS Ratnam as the head of the O&G department at National University Hospital. In all, he stayed in Singapore for 17 years before leaving for the UK in 1997.

We spent quite some time together at the conference, talking about the good old days in KKH, and his present work as chief of both BMA as well as the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics. I even asked him about his knighthood, and he described the process of being knighted at Buckingham Palace by the Queen.

During the convention, we met many local doctors. I already knew quite a few of them, as I have been attending the AMA meetings for a number of years, but I would introduce Sir Arul as my tutor. You could see that he was most pleased with that introduction, as his eyes would light up every time. There is nothing like acknowledging your teachers and mentors in front of other colleagues. It was fitting that the AMA conference started with the Declaration of Geneva, published by the World Medical Association, and among the lines was this: "I will give to my teachers the respect and gratitude which is their due". I am, and am sure we all are, of the opinion that they are most deserving. ■



Top Australian Minister for Health Peter Dutton delivering an address

Middle Doctors queuing up for their turn at the microphone

Bottom Dr Chong with his mentor Sir Sabaratnam Arulkumaran



Dr Chong is a member of the 55th SMA Council. He has been in private practice since 1993 and has seen his fair share of the human condition. He pines for a good pinot noir, loves the FT Weekend and of course, wishes for world peace...