

Presidents' Messages



Making a Meaningful Difference to Healthcare

By A/Prof Chin Jing Jih

AFTER SERVING three terms as President of SMA, I have now stepped down and passed the baton to a new President. This will therefore be my last contribution to the President's Forum, after 35 consecutive monthly articles. I suspect the editorial staff is secretly delighted, as I have struggled over the last three years to meet the monthly deadlines. I do wish to offer a sincere apology here to them for the anxieties and headaches I have put them through with my late submissions and long sentences, respectively. These three years of compulsory writing have been a valuable journey for me, as I have learnt much from the reflections, research and engagement needed to shape my views and writings.

Improving the healthcare landscape

As I look back, I am grateful for the opportunity to have led and shaped the future of SMA and the medical profession, together with my dedicated and capable council

members. I am appreciative of the trust and support that they have given me. It is my sincere wish that our collective vision and industry have contributed towards making a meaningful difference in the lives and health of our patients. A few areas and strategies that we adopted deserve special mention here.

One of the challenges we constantly face, and will continue to face in the future, centres on the issue of trust between the medical profession and society, and between doctors and patients. In Singapore today, patients rarely doubt the clinical competency of doctors, but quite a few lack confidence in their integrity and conduct. In the last few years, SMA, through the positions that we take regarding relevant issues and the provision of educational activities that equip our doctors in ethics, professionalism and health law, consolidated its efforts in advocating and nurturing the trustworthiness of doctors and the medical profession. Our efforts in promoting doctor-

patient communication serve to improve engagement, understanding and finally trust between our doctors and patients.

Another challenge that confronts all Presidents of SMA, past and present, is the heterogeneous membership that we have to serve and lead. Unlike many other professional bodies, members of SMA include specialists from different tertiary specialties, primary care practitioners, doctors from private and public sectors, and doctors from diverse age groups. These different subgroups often present with varying perspectives and needs. In managing such diversity, the SMA President has to first consider what is good for patients and the profession. Doing the right thing often required me and my council to see ourselves as more than mere representatives of our members.

Strong and courageous leadership for SMA means being able to convince our members to also do the right thing, even if it involves a sacrifice of self-interest. It is therefore my

personal hope that, through our consistent messaging and actions, the public and patients have come to accept and appreciate the Association first and foremost as a patient-centric professional organisation, contrary to the common misnomer of SMA as a doctors' union. While many of its projects and efforts do lead to improvement in the lives and working environment of doctors, SMA's ultimate objective as a professional organisation is to improve patient care. The Association's priority will always be to serve and work alongside patients, thereby guaranteeing the long term relevance of the medical profession to society.

Voice of the Profession

I have always maintained that doctors are most effective and trusted by their patients when equipped with high professional morals and morale. During my three terms as President, striving for a reasonable and supportive practice environment for doctors has always been a core mission for SMA. We took the position that SMA must serve as the Voice of the Profession, which naturally and ultimately includes

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advocacy for patients. We took great pains to ensure that SMA does not become a loud Voice known for its “sound and fury, signifying nothing”.

Rather, we have always aimed to earn the respect and recognition of policy makers, regulators and other relevant agencies by being a calm and reasonable Voice, distinguished for its maturity, credibility, and constructiveness. This philosophy of the SMA leadership underlies many patient and astute behind-the-scenes negotiations and engagements that has quietly but successfully earned

its recognition as a credible source of independent and objective opinion. Such an approach makes SMA a far more effective advocate for patients and doctors than one known only for the stirring of emotions and banging of tables.

I hope that my council members and I have in the past three years, made SMA a more effective and resilient professional organisation with a clear vision of what needs to be done in the years ahead. I urge all members to give the incoming President and his team the necessary support and encouragement to continue the endeavour, so that doctors are able to devote their professional time and energy to the ethical provision of effective cure and compassionate care.

May we all uphold the spirit of *Jasa Utama*, putting Service before Self. ■



A/Prof Chin has been President of SMA since 2012. He is a geriatrician in Tan Tock Seng Hospital with an interest in ethics, professionalism and systems of care.