



STRENGTHENING THE LOCAL MEDICAL PROFESSION

— LESSONS FROM MR LEE KUAN YEW

By Dr Leong Choon Kit

“AS OF 11 pm 26th March, the waiting time is nine hours.”

My original plan to bring my children to pay respects to our late Minister Mentor was derailed when I read that online after work. So I spent the next two hours sharing with my daughter what it was like to grow up in the era of Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

“The mark of an extraordinary man is his ability to bring many together despite their differences, even in his death.” This was what a friend heavily involved in grassroots activities told me just the day before. I have to agree.

Reflecting on the medical fraternity, we certainly do not have a doctor in that category, nor even anyone close to that. Not even in the general practice and family medicine community. Why is that so? I can think of a few possibilities and maybe you can share yours too.

With this, I am grateful to *SMA News* for kick-starting this brand new column called “GP Matters”, which will focus on everything regarding GPs and family physicians. We hope to bring up issues, ideas and opinions that will benefit everyone. In addition, whenever any SMA member writes in with questions regarding GP practices, we will seek the invaluable views and advice of fellow colleagues and publish them here. Email your thoughts to news@sma.org.sg. Your contribution is important and much appreciated.

To start our brain cells firing, I would briefly mention a few lessons I have learnt while queuing up to pay tribute and expand them in the subsequent issues of this publication.

Our training, health system and structure, and upbringing

Our training has taught us to be individualistic and self-centric. It is cost-efficient, cost-effective and reduces confusion. Translated into

real world medical practice, GPs are alone in our clinics. After a while, we only care about ourselves.

“I just stopped my subscriptions to SMA and CFPS (College of Family Physicians Singapore).” This is something I have heard often. And the commonest reason given is: “Why should I? After all these years of paying, I have not received any tangible returns.”

The healthcare system in Singapore is divisive in structure. Free market principles were brought in; we were encouraged to compete to bring out the best of one another, and hopefully lower healthcare costs. In the process, our trust and camaraderie were affected.

As medical science and technology advances, medical practice is divided into more specialties and subspecialties. This phenomenon creates difficulties in grooming a doctor to unify the fraternity. General practice and family medicine are not spared. We have various interest groups as well.

Doctors, by selection, are gentle people. We are cordial even if we have differences. We consider others’ feelings, and seldom really trade blows, at least not in public. However, that would also mean that we lack the opportunity to develop a strong character to lead.

The public often reminds us that we are specially chosen people, that we should abide by the Hippocratic Oath, that we should waive all fees, and the list goes on.

With all these challenges, it seems that we are facing an impossible task. Hopefully not.

Unity first

First, we desperately need to be unified. Mr Lee has shown us how he united a country more diverse than our specialties and subspecialties.

Mr Lee gave Singapore a common identity but not a combined identity. He managed to build a successful country with a huge diversity of people, yet at the same time, he allowed each group to keep their unique identity. Likewise, we require a common identity and a common vision, yet contribute to the unity with our specialised skills and training.

On top of having a common medical identity, we must simultaneously acknowledge the distinctive and important role everyone plays, from the frontline GPs to the acute settings at emergency departments to the specialists in tertiary hospitals.

Self-pride

Second, Mr Lee instilled pride in Singaporeans and gave them self-confidence. We need to restore our self-confidence and improve our image in the public eye.

I was brought up in the era when our country had the world’s busiest port, the world’s largest oil refinery, and later the world’s best airline and best airport. Similarly, instead of fighting with other doctors to be the best in Singapore, let us help one another to achieve global standards.

GPs in the private sector are nimble and cover large geographical areas with unmatched access. On the other hand, polyclinics have large financial backings and resources. Both can work hand in hand to achieve greatness.

Family physicians in primary care can help tertiary hospitals see complicated cases and relieve their loads. The former can also refer the difficult and complicated patients upwards for the latter to work on and achieve greatness.

With all the systems working in synchrony, the public will have a truly world-class healthcare system that

both the public and our Ministry of Health can boast about.

Honesty and integrity

Third, Mr Lee insisted on absolute integrity and honesty without sacrificing pragmatism. This is very sensitive. Our current system is certainly robust enough to weed out the obviously wrong.

Many things happen in the grey areas, some deliberately but the majority due to ignorance. Only an experienced and well-trained doctor can pick these up. The public, relying on the Internet, will not be able to discern them. We in the medical profession have a duty to educate them about medical knowledge. Concurrently, we have to upkeep the highest standard in integrity and honesty, so that the trust the public has in us will not be eroded.

Back to my friends who confide in me about them severing ties with the respective professional bodies, I urge that we take the first step towards unity. That is, to rejoin these professional bodies, and let us work together to create a future for the public and our fraternity, one which our late Minister Mentor would be proud of.* ■

*Visit <https://www.sma.org.sg/membership> to sign up for SMA membership.



Dr Leong Choon Kit is a GP in the private sector. He feels strongly about doctors contributing back to society. As a result, he tries to lend a voice to the silent majority in every issue he has come across, particularly those in healthcare, educational and other social concerns.