



President's Welcome Address

By Dr Wong Tien Hua

SMA WAS formed in 1959 with the following objectives: to foster unity in the medical profession, promote medical sciences in Singapore, uphold a high standard of medical ethics and conduct, voice its opinion to the Government regarding the practice of the profession, and to enlighten and shape public opinion on Singapore's healthcare landscape.

Today, SMA carries out this mission through a wide variety of activities and programmes. SMA regularly holds educational courses, lectures and training for both medical doctors and allied health professionals, administers the medical protection scheme, provides an avenue for social assistance and volunteerism through our SMA Charity Fund, and sets the benchmarks for good clinical practice through the activities of our Centre for Medical Ethics & Professionalism (CMEP).

Through *SMA News*, we are the Voice of the Profession, as we engage our members and encourage contributions from medical students, residents and doctors in both public

service and private practice. We also provide independent and constructive feedback to policymakers and regulatory agencies. We encourage lifelong learning and promote local clinical research through the *Singapore Medical Journal*. Our membership committee organises sporting events, cultural activities and social dinners.

However, perhaps because of these very broad areas of engagement, SMA is not an easy organisation to understand at first glance. Non-member doctors perceive SMA as an organisation that guards the interests of doctors, akin to a union of medical professionals. Members of the public see the medical association as a place to turn to when a problem of ethics or malpractice arises.

SMA has always emphasised the need to put the interests of our patients first, because we believe that what is good for our patients will eventually benefit the profession. After all, we are not a union or a guild, which puts its members' interests above others'. So the question often arises – is SMA

Guest of Honour
Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam
President of the Republic of Singapore



Clockwise from far left
Dr Wong Tien Hua delivering his welcome address

Dr Wong thanking President Dr Tony Tan after he unveiled the Association's new slogan
President Tan arriving at the dinner
Introducing the 56th SMA Council

for doctors or for patients, or both?

How can SMA fulfill its role to its members, represent the medical profession as a whole and meet the expectations of the public at the same time?

I believe that the solution lies in identifying what it is in the medical profession that intrinsically binds the physician and the patient together. Medicine is not only about cure, care and comfort, but it is also fundamentally about a relationship – that between the doctor and the patient.

The doctor-patient relationship forms the forum through which effective communication resides, because it is not based on one encounter but numerous engagements built up over time. It is a relationship that requires both parties to invest time and effort, with the pay-off being mutual respect and trust. An effective doctor-patient relationship is in itself therapeutic and promotes healing.

It is important for the public to understand that a visit to their family doctor for a seemingly simple condition is nevertheless an important building block in the long-term relationship between them. Like fine wine, trust takes time to ferment over many years and through many encounters. As far as possible, patients should stick with one family doctor instead of doctor hopping.

Medical ethics and professionalism underlies the notion

of a good doctor-patient relationship. This relationship is under threat when poor communication causes misunderstandings and a rise in patient complaints. It is under threat when business practices limit the autonomy of doctors through controls and restrictions. It is under threat when policies and regulations become overly prescriptive, hence reducing the doctor's role in clinical judgement based on patient context.

We strongly believe that a good doctor-patient relationship is something worth defending; SMA should align its basic priorities towards the goal of protecting the doctor-patient relationship.

This evening, we are very pleased to invite our Guest of Honour, President Tony Tan to unveil the new slogan for SMA. We hope the new slogan will bring the Association's mission into sharper focus.

In the coming months, SMA will organise our various activities and programmes to align with this new slogan. We will have dialogues and seminars to explore how we can develop the idea and practice of a good doctor-patient relationship – its roles in communication, building trust, improving outcomes and achieving greater patient satisfaction. I look forward to your support and participation in the months ahead. ■