

# FIGHTING FOR THE GOOD OF HUMANITY



Daniel volunteers with the Singapore Association for Mental Health, Singapore Children's Society and Paya Lebar Methodist Girls' School, and hopes to see more doctors involved in social advocacy.

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Guest Editor

Doctors have always been on the forefront of social change and there is a long and venerable list of medical doctors who fought and are fighting for the problems they see in society. While advocacy for patients' rights is often seen as part of a doctor's duties, advocating for social injustice is not as clear-cut. Dobson and colleagues<sup>1</sup> described the two forms of advocacy. One is that of advocating for individual patients, a role that we are all familiar and comfortable with. This was termed **agency**. Many doctors advocate for their patients in terms of better treatments and subsidised care. It is not hard to voice out on areas which we are comfortable to speak of, such as healthcare-related advocacy. One example is when we need to provide for medications which are expensive yet critical for helping patients with a disease like cancer. This form of advocacy comes naturally for doctors.

Dobson et al speaks of another form of advocacy which they termed **activism**. This form is described by the American Medical Association as advocating for "social, economic, educational and political change". This is far less common and some may tell us that we should enter politics to achieve it. I beg to differ.

There are many issues that politicians and governments cannot address. I would like to think that because doctors are often held in high regard, what we say and do can have social, economic, educational and even political impact. The Singapore Medical Council Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines<sup>2</sup> state that we should "participate in activities contributing to the good of the community, including public health education". In Singapore, we have doctors who advocate for specific causes and also doctors who enter politics and by default act as social activists. But these are not many. In order to be good advocates, doctors must be kept abreast of what is happening in the world and not just in knowledge and science of the work we do in treatment of illness. The World Health Organisation stated elegantly in its constitution in 1948 that health is not just absence of illness but the maintenance of social, mental and physical well-being. The medical motto of "Not pride of knowledge but humility of wisdom" certainly implies the need to exercise wisdom and to advocate this to the world at large. The future of medicine lies in preventing illness and maintaining well-being and it will require a population health approach and doctors will have to be more than just experts in treating illness. Social activism to improve lifestyles and reduce risks and harmful behaviours will be critical for new medical practitioners.

In this issue, we discuss the importance of doctors being aware of substance abuse and dependence, as well as the physician's role in managing this growing problem. Like smoking, marijuana is sometimes thought of as a harmless social activity but the evidence suggests that it may be a gateway to a whole host of social problems. Whether it is in woman's rights, medical students' welfare, bringing out the best of GPs, managing stress or critical incidents, the concept is the same; we as doctors can do so much more if we see the big picture and lend a hand in making the world a better place.

#### References

1. Dobson S, Voyer S, Regehr G. Agency and activism: rethinking health advocacy in the medical profession. *Acad Med* 2012; 87:1161–4.
2. Singapore Medical Council. SMC Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines. Available at: [http://www.healthprofessionals.gov.sg/content/hprof/smc/en/topnav/guidelines/ethical\\_code\\_and\\_ethical\\_guidelines.html](http://www.healthprofessionals.gov.sg/content/hprof/smc/en/topnav/guidelines/ethical_code_and_ethical_guidelines.html).