



# SMA LECTURE

# 2017

Text by Jo-Ann Teo, Editorial Executive

| Dr Loo Choon Yong

“Our doctors will face the task of reconciling conflicting objectives. Lucrative opportunities created by strong domestic demand and the trend towards reaching out to regional and global markets will have to be balanced against the need to maintain equitable access to medical care for our citizens.”<sup>1</sup>  
– Mr Barry Desker, SMA Lecturer, 1991.

Twenty-six years after Mr B Desker delivered his seminal lecture, “Singapore’s role in the provision of medical service in the region”, one can’t help but wonder if his incisive observation still rings true today?

In this year’s SMA Lecture, Dr Loo Choon Yong, Executive Chairman and Co-founder of Raffles Medical Group (RMG), addressed this and other pertinent issues in his lecture entitled “Internationalising Singapore Medicine”. Held on Saturday, 4 November 2017, at the Grand Copthorne Waterfront, the annual event attracted medical practitioners from various specialities and backgrounds, medical students, as well as healthcare business professionals.

Instituted in 1963, the SMA Lecture has consistently provided a platform for constructive conversations on prevailing and pressing socio-medical matters that have significant impact on the medical

profession. The hall of fame of SMA Lecturers includes prominent thought leaders in their respective fields, such as Arthur Ransome, Yahya Cohen, Gwee Ah Leng, NK Yong, Wong Hock Boon, K Shanmugaratnam, Chew Chin Hin, and Sundaresh Menon, to name a few.

### Opening address and citation

In his opening address (see page 9), SMA President Dr Wong Tien Hua looked back fondly on his stint in RMG Hong Kong in the 1990s and considered that overseas experience “a very interesting journey of internationalisation”. He concluded his speech by imploring the audience to ask themselves this important question: what makes Singapore Medicine worth exporting?

Prof Walter Tan, in his citation for Dr Loo (see page 7), recounted Dr Loo’s many accomplishments, and described his long-time friend and colleague as “a completely indefatigable man... always pushing the boundaries and exploring new ideas, never daunted by failures but instead inspired to do better.”

With these stirring introductions, we were all set for an afternoon of insightful lecture and invigorating discussions.

### Recapturing the vision

Dr Loo opened his lecture with a challenge to “strengthen our resolve and redouble our efforts to rebuild Singapore as the pre-eminent healthcare hub of the region.” He opined that Singapore has lost this aspiration, because it has accepted that it no longer has the competitive edge over other regional healthcare centres. To rekindle this vision, Dr Loo proposed four areas of development in Singapore healthcare.

Firstly, Singapore healthcare needs to focus on providing quality care and not compete on price alone, as excellent service, professionalism and trustworthiness are highly sought after by wealthy international patients. Dr Loo, however, cautioned against overpricing. Secondly, Singapore needs to position itself as a leading healthcare training centre and the “reference point to which people benchmark for high quality and standards”. This, he opined, will result in more referrals of complex medical cases from the region. Thirdly, Singapore needs to boost its growing reputation as a healthcare research and development (R&D) centre, as this will not only expand our development as an international healthcare hub, but also advance our

## DID YOU KNOW?



**The first SMA Lecture** was delivered by **Dr Gwee Ah Leng** in 1963

SMA Lecture became a yearly affair only in 1969



**The first non-SMA Member** to be invited to deliver a Lecture was **Dr M K Rajakumar** of Malaysia

In the early days, the Lecture was the key feature of the **SMA Medical Convention**



**Dr Yahya Cohen** was the only doctor who was **SMA Lecturer for two consecutive years** in 1970 and 1971

**The first non-doctor** invited to deliver a Lecture was **Mr Justice P Coomaraswamy**



efforts at internationalisation. Finally, Singapore healthcare companies need to continue to venture overseas. Using RMG as an example, he emphasised that local healthcare companies expanding abroad should aim to not only provide high-quality healthcare services of international standards, but also plant the organisation's "culture, ethos and brand of healthcare on foreign soil".

Dr Loo added that, to recapture the vision of Singapore as a world class, highly sought-after regional healthcare hub, the above four areas must work synergistically, in partnership with the public sector and the Government.

The public sector, in Dr Loo's view, should take the lead in medical training and R&D efforts, and focus its energies and key resources on serving Singaporean patients. For foreign patients seeking care in Singapore, he urged the "Ministry of Health and private players to explore sustainable forms of collaboration with open minds and fresh eyes". Dr Loo also appealed to the Government to consider implementing some fiscal measures to increase Singapore's competitiveness.

To conclude his lecture, Dr Loo reiterated that sustainable, synergistic collaborations among the Ministry of Health and Singapore healthcare players are necessary to avert the threat to Singapore's status as a regional healthcare hub. He is optimistic that, with the attraction of Singapore's other world class services such as communications, information technology and finance, together with concerted efforts to increase our competitiveness as a regional health service provider, Singapore healthcare will continue to remain relevant to the world.

### Panel discussion

A lively panel discussion then followed, with SMA Council Member A/Prof Nigel Tan serving as the moderator. The panel consisted of Dr Loo Choon Yong; Dr Chan Boon Kheng, Healthcare Advisor; Dr Jeremy Lim, Partner & Head, Health & Life Sciences, Asia Pacific, Oliver Wyman; and Mr Phua Tien Beng, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Operations Division, Parkway Pantai Limited.

“**Today, Singapore is recognised as a regional healthcare hub, but our status is threatened. We need to do more to compete with other regional healthcare centres. We can only succeed if we put our strengths and efforts together.**”

– Dr Loo Choon Yong

Members of the audience raised several interesting questions spanning various aspects of the afternoon's topic, such as the correlation between the region's changing demographics and developments in information technology; the importance of using technology to ensure consistency; and how local doctors can stay competitive in the region. The panellists addressed each question with clarity, often supporting their responses with examples to better illustrate their points.

### Final thoughts

SMA Lecture 2017 has given us some interesting food for thought. As Singapore healthcare seeks to compete on the world stage, may the words of Mr B Desker – spoken more than two decades ago – be a timely reminder to us: "In seeking a place in an internationally competitive service industry, nothing is of greater benefit than the awareness that you stand for the best available delivery of services in your field". ♦

### Reference

1. Desker B. 1991 SMA Lecture. Singapore and the provision of medical services for the region. *Singapore Med J* 1991; 32(6):388-90.



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**Legend**

- 1. Panellists addressing the audiences' queries
- 2. SMA Council Members posing for a shot with the Lecturer and panellists
- 3. A participant raising queries for discussion



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