

TRIBUTE TO Giants & Unsung Heroes

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

It has been about nine months since COVID-19 first arrived in Singapore – about as long as a pregnancy! We have weathered many challenges together, as a nation and as a profession. The whole world is struggling together to accept the new norm in travel restrictions, physical gatherings, and even in daily life events such as going out on a grocery run. As we transit somewhat gradually back to normality, we continue to remind each other not to take the safety for granted. However, life must go on.

There are many ongoing changes within the Singapore Medical Council and in disciplinary processes, which require changes to the law. I hope that doctors have involved themselves in the many discussions over the past two years, and the recent parliamentary discussions on amendments to the Medical Registration Act. It is unbecoming to stay ignorant, and react with indignation later that “no one asked me”.

Instrumental in coordinating the battle against COVID-19 is Director of Medical Services A/Prof Kenneth Mak, who has always been a consistent teacher and mentor to those of us who passed through general surgery training – not just in surgery, but in critical thinking and analysis. The first time I met him was probably for the MMed/MRCS prep course, and later on for the FRCS exit prep course. He always made time for each batch of trainees, often beyond the assigned

Illustration: Dr Justinian Zai



sessions! Even as he got busier after taking on more leadership positions, he was still deeply committed to teaching. He remains patient and calm, even when faced with blank faces and our complete ignorance of certain topics. He is skilled at breaking down difficult and complex concepts so that even the most obtuse among us can gain some understanding – enough to pass the examinations at least!

I am honoured and glad that he has made the time to speak to *SMA News*, and we look forward to future collaborations and engagements.

Giants and leaders

There is a saying that I like, about “standing on the shoulders of giants” – it is only by leveraging on what seniors before us have achieved that we can aim to achieve more. Two similar Chinese sayings that I also value are:

1. 前人种树, 后人乘凉 (in English: the forebearers plant the trees, those who come after enjoy the shade)
2. 长江后浪推前浪, 青出于蓝而胜于蓝 (in English: the back waves of the Yangtze River push the front waves, and the green that comes from blue is better than blue)

These sayings remind me that what we enjoy and may take for granted today (eg, no restrictions on the number of women in medical school, getting on-call pay) came from the seniors before us (as recent as in the last 15 to 20 years) who pushed for these changes. I wonder too what changes I could push for and implement today that can better the livelihoods of younger doctors and doctors-to-be.

Investing in the younger generation is always important, to ensure that they learn and grow; we look to

empower them, so that they may exceed and be even better than us. I feel that belief all the more now – being a mother to young children and wanting them to have more opportunities than I did – and we must not forget the essential grounding in moral values that will stand them in good stead, no matter what life’s temptations and stressors will bring. The SMA Centre for Medical Ethics and Professionalism, under Dr Lee Pheng Soon’s leadership with key contributions from Dr T Thirumoorthy, has recently launched a series of workshops titled “Medicine, Doctor and the Law”; do check your emails for announcements or write in to enquire more.

Unsung heroes

There are approximately 15,000 doctors in Singapore. While we would all know the prominent ones who have deservedly received official accolades and awards, I want to highlight that I have always believed in team work and that all of us make up a greater whole. Regardless of where you work at, which year/ country you graduated from, or where you came from, we are here now, working together for the betterment of the people living in Singapore.

This month’s *SMA News* showcases but a few of the doctors who have been an essential part of our healthcare system – sometimes under-appreciated, sometimes unseen. Well, I see you and I appreciate the nature of the work you do – coming together with a common purpose, putting aside all superficial differences of race, nationality, age and specialty to do our collective best for humanity. Maybe I’m getting sentimental or maudlin, but this amazing tapestry woven from so many different threads while staying strong in this (inter)national crisis really deserves some admiration. This crisis has shown

how much good can be done when we all come together and put patients’ interest first.

Likewise, the long-standing problems with insurance panels and third-party administrators can only be resolved when we all come together on common ground.

I have always kept an eye on these problems; as a junior doctor in SMA Council and as a restructured hospital’s doctor, they seemed rather theoretical. But now, in the multiple familial roles I play – as a middle-aged woman who requires various health screenings, a daughter who needs to accompany elderly parents for medical care, and a mother who has to prepare a child for major surgery in the future – I take great personal interest in making sure that these problems are sorted out. Having just stepped into private practice over a year ago, I see the various business aspects, and I hold on to the ethos of servant leadership as the President of the SMA.

The SMA is “for doctors, for patients”. How do I execute this vision of doing right by everyone? ♦

Dr Tan is a mother to three kids, wife to a surgeon; a daughter and a daughter-in-law. She trained as a general surgeon, and entered private practice just over a year ago, focusing on breast surgery. She treasures her friends and wishes to have more time for her diverse interests: cooking, eating, music, drawing, writing, photography and comedy.

