

A NEW YEAR, A NEW HOPE

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

As we welcome 2021, I see the year heralding new hope and new beginnings. I'm referring, of course, to the COVID-19 vaccines that have been developed and are being administered to various populations around the world. In time, this should bring us closer to the world we knew, but perhaps with increased sensitivity and respect for Mother Earth and the ecosystem we live in.¹

Our role as community leaders

The world suffered together in 2020, with the global pandemic having unprecedented effects on our economy, healthcare, travel, and even restrictions on personal behaviour.

Where then is the balance between individual rights and autonomy, and the needs of society and the greater good?² Debates arose over the use of masks, number of people that can gather, need for vaccination, and access to limited resources such as ventilators, test kits and vaccines. As individuals, it behoves us to remain educated and updated on the information and data available to make informed decisions. As professional leaders, we must engage with various stakeholders, and intelligently discuss the pros and cons of the various strategies to achieve maximum good for our society.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) reached out to the professional medical bodies to co-host webinars on Singapore's COVID-19 vaccination strategy. The first session was rolled out on 19 December 2020 with SMA. Attendance was overwhelming, with close

to 1,000 participants. I urge all doctors to stay vigilant in the use of vaccines and report adverse reactions, if any, as they arise. This should be done without vaccine panic, but with reasonable caution as in the use of any new medication. Each of us serves as a leader to our community and circle of influence, as others look to us for guidance.

Meanwhile, we must all continue to practise other basic precautions which have been shown to be effective: good hand hygiene, avoiding crowded places and mask-wearing.

Continued engagement

The SMA Council has continued to collaborate very closely with our sister professional bodies – the Academy of Medicine, Singapore and College of Family Physicians Singapore – in matters of professionalism, development and COVID-19 support. Together, we have also been working closely with MOH on the management of private healthcare costs, insurance coverage, and third-party administrator practices. The issues are complex and involve multiple stakeholders. This is a massive ongoing project and I urge everyone to take note and be involved in these discussions.

While it might seem like only the private sector is affected, we are all part of the Singapore healthcare system, and we need to look after all our patients, be they "private" or "public". Not forgetting that we will all be patients someday and I, for one, would want to know that my

Integrated Shield Plan (IP) has fair and adequate coverage.

The SMA Council has also been increasing our efforts to engage more sectors of our profession. I would like to highlight some of these efforts and express my thanks and deepest appreciation for the people involved.

Dr Ng Chew Lip, Dr Benny Loo, Dr Lim Kheng Choon and Dr Ivan Low have reached out to the medical students (local and overseas) and doctors in training. There were several meetings via Zoom, including the setting up of a Telegram network to modernise our mode of engagement.

Dr Ng Chee Kwan and Dr Wong Chiang Yin have been instrumental in representing the rights and needs of doctors in the private sector.

Dr Lee Pheng Soon, the current Executive Director of the SMA Centre for Medical Ethics and Professionalism, has developed additional courses and updated existing ones in the development of ethics training.

Dr Tina Tan and Dr Chie Zhi Ying head the *SMA News* and have maintained a great selection of vibrant articles and kept us up-to-date with the rapid changes in COVID-19-related matters over the past year.

I am also thankful to the various Council doctors who further represent our profession in various committees,³ and all our volunteers who have given their time to be involved in SMA's work and committees.



#SGArtforHCW

Growth and support

I was rather disheartened last December to see the usual group of year-end resignations from SMA Membership. Whenever this happens, the reasons given are similar: "I do not see any point. I do not have any benefits". I wish Members would share with us what constitutes "benefits", to you.

Members can attend continuing medical education (CME) activities at no cost, and enjoy special rates for classified ads and training for clinic assistants.

Over the years, our membership team has also sourced for many lifestyle perks and discounts from restaurants and merchants for our Members. On less tangible benefits – and really, what being an SMA Member means – the SMA has championed various causes over the years: junior doctors' remuneration,⁴ SARS support,⁵ Guideline on Fees,⁶ taxes for doctors,⁷ etc. At the beginning of the current pandemic, the SMA organised sales of N95 and surgical masks,⁸ as well as a hand sanitiser distribution exercise for Members.⁹ The SMA also spoke up for doctors on CME requirements and childcare arrangements,¹⁰ and suggested measures to alleviate

pressure on doctors that were eventually implemented by the respective entities.

The SMA has also continued to advocate for doctors and patients in addressing unfair practices by managed care companies and third-party administrators,¹¹ exclusion

of coverage for diagnostic endoscopies under some IPs¹² and stepped in when Members complained about their particulars being listed without permission on the DoctorxDentist website.¹³ The SMA does not only speak up for the private sector, or younger doctors, or a specific group. Ultimately, as medical professionals, we all share a common goal and a responsibility to our patients, and to honour our profession – *For Doctors, For Patients*.

In the past year, the COVID-19 support that the SMA secretariat and Council has provided for our Members (and even non-members) was immense, considering that we are a non-governmental and non-profit organisation. I am especially grateful for the many new friends and the show of support from doctors who appreciate what we do. Your support means a lot to me and the Council, as we continue to represent you.

Friends and Members of the SMA, I call on your support in the year ahead, as we take on the challenges of tackling increasing healthcare costs, adapting to changes in the new disciplinary process of the Singapore Medical Council, and in the teaching and development of professionalism and medical ethics.

Help us to help you; invite your friends to sign up as Members. The larger our representation, the stronger our collective voice. ◆

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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.



N95 and surgical mask sales



Hand sanitiser distribution