



(L-R) Mr T K Udairam, Prof Ivy Ng, Dr Chong Yeh Woei, Dr Wong Chiang Yin, Prof Woo Keng Thye, Prof Foo Keong Tatt, A/Prof Chan Yew Weng, Prof Evan Lee, Prof Tan Cheng Lim

THE MAKING OF THE SMA LECTURE 2007:

Physician Leadership

By Prof Woo Keng Thye

Dr Wong Chiang Yin, President of SMA, informed me after the lecture that my submission of the lecture for publication in the *Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ)* did not do justice to the actual lecture delivered. It was too subdued and lacked the incisive eloquence of the actual delivery. The next day I received an e-mail from Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor of *SMA News*, requesting for another version of the lecture for the newsletter, which should be written in a conversational and lighthearted way. He told me he would use some of the comic slides from my talk and interpose these within the text. I told him I shall then do a version on the making of the SMA Lecture.

One of the first things I did after thinking about how I would approach the topic was to look at the internet. As I suspected, there were dozens of articles on Physician Leadership. I told myself that

nobody would want to hear a regurgitated version of Physician Leadership which they could get from www.physicianleadership.com

When I was preparing the lecture, I was aware that it would be on an evening during a weekday when most doctors would be tired at the end of the day and wanting to go home to join their families for dinner and relaxation. So I had to deliver a lecture of value with a new perspective rather than tell them about things they already knew, make it lighthearted and provide comic relief. But how do you sustain their attention for about 40 minutes? Tell them about life and death? But doctors know all about these. So I decided to do the reverse, tell them about death and life, that is, talk about War – bring in *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu and draw the parallels between War and Medicine.

The lecture begins with the premise that all doctors, by virtue of their training and profession,

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Published by the Singapore Medical Association, Level 2, Alumni Medical Centre, 2 College Road, Singapore 169850.
Tel: 6223 1264
Fax: 6224 7827
Email: news@sma.org.sg
URL: <http://www.sma.org.sg>
SMA Reg. No.: ROS 198/59 TAP

are leaders and are expected to lead not just in their professional capacity but when called upon, as a service to the community, to lead in other areas of human endeavours like charitable organisations, expeditions, business and politics.

Our undisputed leaders are the Masters of the Academy of Medicine, beginning with Prof Sir Gordon Arthur Ransome, our First Master, and following through all the other 22 Masters ending with Prof Ho Lai Yun, the present Master. These Masters are our Standard Bearers. They set high ethical standards and are our role models for medical leadership. Observe how they conduct their lives and you will learn much about medical leadership. There are also others like Prof Arthur Lim, a past President of the Medical Alumni who is a well known physician leader. In Malaysia, there is Dr Mohd Mahathir, who was the Prime Minister for more than 30 years. In Singapore, we also have our 'Agong', Dr Chee Phui Hung, a seasoned leader in the House of Alumni, who holds court at the Alumni everyday at lunch time. He has his Knights of the Oblong Table and they have chairs with their names engraved. Go to the Medical Alumni at lunch time and 'Agong' will offer you peanuts and other goodies.

Across the causeway, there are equally good physician leaders, among them Professor Sandosham, famous for his *Sexy Sandy's Spice* published in the Malaysian Medical Association's (MMA) newsletter and others like Dr Cassim Samsuddin and Dr Madhuri Majunder. But the person I consider the Physician Leader par excellence is Dr Wu Lien-Teh.

Dr Wu Lien-Teh was a familiar figure in Ipoh in the 1950s. In 1903, he became the first Queen Scholar from Malaya. He returned to Malaya after a brilliant scholastic career at Cambridge and St Mary's in London where he swept all the top prizes and awards of the day. He joined the Institute of Medical Research in Kuala Lumpur and at age 24 obtained his MD from Cambridge. He then returned to his hometown in Penang to practise. In Penang, he was plunged into the anti-opium campaign and became the President of the Anti-Opium Association. He failed miserably due to British interference. Subsequently he was offered the post of Vice Director of the Imperial

Army Medical College by President Yuan Shi Kai in China.

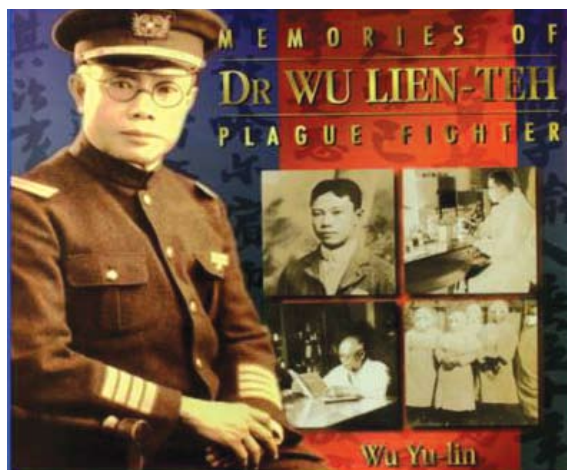
In 1910, a mysterious illness occurred in the Chinese sector of the half-Russian town of Harbin. Patients presented with fever, cough, bloody sputum and a purplish discolouration of the skin and died within a few days. At that time, there was a great demand for the pelt of the marmot, a wild rodent found in Manchuria and Siberia. Its fur could pass off as sable and people hunted the rodent for its meat and fur.

On the third day of Dr Wu's arrival in Harbin, he conducted the first post mortem examination on one of the patients and confirmed that the patient died from pneumonic plague. He ordered masks and instituted measures to check the spread of the infection. He led a search and found that the Tarabagan or Mongolian Marmot was the reservoir of the plague. He also discovered heaps of

corpses left unburied because the patients died so rapidly. With a mandate from the Qing Emperor, he ordered the first mass cremation of the corpses (unheard of in China at that time) and lit a bonfire that made medical history. The first hospital in China was built by Dr Wu in 1912 followed by many others. He was awarded the Order

of the Double Dragon by the Qing Emperor and became world renowned, chairing the first WHO meeting on plague. During the last 19 years of his life, he practised Medicine in Ipoh helping the poor by providing free consultation and medicine. He was truly a humanitarian leader.

What is the fundamental advantage that doctors have over others in becoming leaders? A doctor's basic training is to study and understand human nature. As students and as medical practitioners, doctors are exposed to a whole gamut of human behaviour. The patient, because of the doctor-patient relationship and confidentiality, will present to his doctor his raw and uninhibited personality. After years of practice and experience, this allows a doctor a good grasp of human nature and behaviour, which enables him to become a better leader. Somerset Maugham, a doctor-writer famous for his short stories on human nature wrote "I see them capable of every meanness and every heroism: that indeed is why I find them so interesting, sympathetic and amusing. Remember that I had a



very useful training in a large London hospital. It taught me lessons I have never forgotten, and for which I can never be sufficiently grateful. There I saw human nature in the raw.”

There are three qualities I consider essential in a strong leader. Firstly, a strong leader must have vision and be able to secure an envisioned future. He can do so by “learning from the future” through “scenario planning”. Secondly, he must have the ability to sacrifice. He must be prepared to die for the greater good. He must eat, sleep and suffer with the men; know and understand them to “engender loyalty”. By doing so he can gain their respect and men will die for him. Courage is the third essential quality in a leader. A good leader must have courage to protect his people. He must be principled, have integrity, including courage to relinquish his position and “do the right thing”. When faced with a crisis, he must be prepared “to cut off his thumb to save the hand”. This is the ultimate sacrifice.

Having secured the leadership position, how does one retain it? I call this “engendering leadership”. One must have a strategy to engender the leadership position so that one can sit on the throne for a longer period. Learn this from *The Art of War*.

Various books and adaptations of the ancient classic impart to the reader much food for thought and clever strategies aplenty so as to cause indigestion. The reader is filled with knowledge confined to the realms of book learning. I have long thought about these and condensed everything into half a dozen leadership strategies.

The six leadership strategies are:

1 Walk the ground

As a leader, you cannot be an armchair anatomist. A leader has to be among his people at all levels and at all times. He has to listen and learn at first hand in order to understand the problems.

2 Have trusted lieutenants

Always have a few trusted lieutenants who can form a think tank with you. They can offer unsolicited advice as long as it is for the good of the team.

3 Gather information

Always have your ears on the home ground as well as the ground of your rivals. This will give an accurate measure of events or problems in order to develop counter strategies. It is useful to employ undercover agents to gather information and check on feedback received.

4 Create confusion

Be prepared to send out wrong signals to lure or confuse the rival. The circuitous route may

give the rival a wrong impression and lead him away from your intended goal.

5 Win the most while doing the least

The ideal situation is to win without fighting. If you can win the battle while still in the boardroom, that is, without engaging in the actual battle, this is the ideal situation.

6 Know what is good will not last forever

When you have won the battle, sitting on your lofty perch surveying the losers below, do not be content resting on your laurels as there are others coveting your position. Sooner or later they will come for you. So while you are ahead, be prepared for a “dignified exit”.

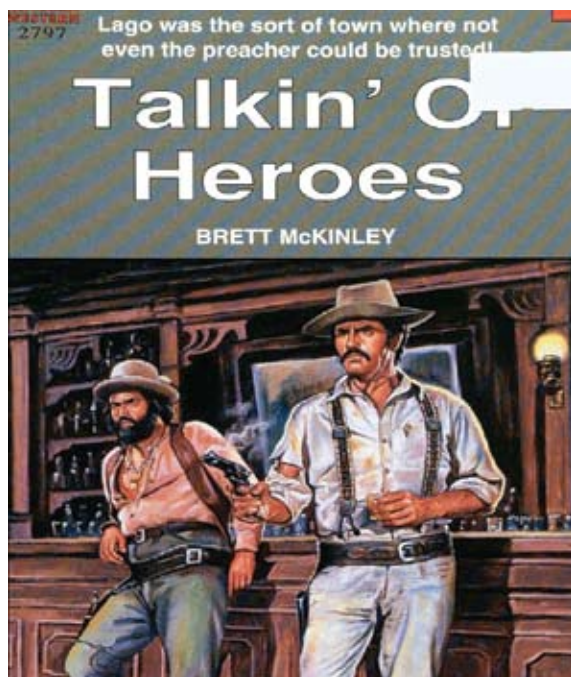
POSITIONING AND POSTURING

An effective leader positions himself and his products in situations where they will survive. Then he waits for the opportunity to act. Survival depends on one’s own action. Triumph depends on the actions of others. If your resources are not adequate, use a defensive approach. When the time is right, act quickly. To control a situation through confrontation or emotion does not indicate superior ability. Neither does winning a heated argument in a public place. An effective leader creates the conditions for victory. A losing leader takes initiative before knowing how to succeed.

There is a difference between positioning and posturing. Positioning is used when you are assured of victory or when you are already sitting on the



The Immortal Marshal, clearly in position.



The baddies posture with a show of bravado.

throne. Posturing is when you are still uncertain of victory. You posture to intimidate the rival. In the cartoons shown, the heroes indicate positioning.

HOW DOES ONE NURTURE GOOD LEADERSHIP?

Someone may be born with leadership qualities but he must still be nurtured. Attend school for leaders, courses and workshops. There must be a period of training to gain exposure and experience. Learn from other leaders. Watch and listen, look at their behaviour, how they make decisions and the consequences of these decisions. Read, watch and learn from other leaders through their biographies. Learn from history because history repeats itself.

SECURING YOUR LEGACY

During the Qing Dynasty, Emperor Kang Xi sent his fourth son, Yong Zheng, away for 10 years to “protect” him from his brothers plotting for the throne. He wrote a secret will to appoint him as heir though historians debated that Yong Zheng altered his father’s will to make himself the successor.

Emperor Yong Zheng in turn made his elder son drink poison wine so that he could no longer plot to kill Qian Long, the younger son who was his designated successor.

Emperor Qian Long at age 69 fell under the charms of Heshan, an unscrupulous palace guard and over the next 15 years, the Empire declined. The remaining emperors were unable to preserve the dynasty, ending with Puyi in 1911.

Emperor Kang Xi was brilliant, benevolent and wise. Yong Zheng was decisive, disciplined and

ruthless and worked hard to lay the foundation of good governance for Qian Long. Qian Long sat too long on the throne and became incompetent in his later years. So do not warm the seat for too long.

COURAGE AND FEAR

A leader must not be afraid. Fear is one’s worst enemy. You defeat yourself with your own fear. Do not be afraid of losing your leadership position when you become a leader. Be prepared to relinquish it at any time.

I quote from Ernest Hemingway’s Nobel Prize - winning book *The Old Man and the Sea*: “A man can be destroyed, but not defeated.”

As I often tell people, do not be afraid of doing the right thing. The worst they can do to you is to kill you, but they have not defeated you. A good leader must be prepared to die when championing the cause or protecting his people.

EXITING LEADERSHIP

A good leader should groom one or more successors to secure his legacy. Climbing up the mountain is difficult. It can be even more difficult making the descent. One may have to contend with a slippery slope.

Some organisations retain old leaders as advisors and mentors. They should know how to conduct themselves properly and not sow discord. A retired leader should still be able to command respect from his peers and preserve his dignity. He can be seen but not heard. Better still if he is not seen and not heard.

I quote from T S Elliot’s poem “Ash Wednesday”:

“Why should an aged eagle spread its wings?
Why should it mourn the vanished power of the usual reign?”

When you complete your term of office, it is good to be relieved of the burden of leadership. You should be happy as you are now rid of stress and can lead your own life peacefully. Occasionally you may be invited to deliver a lecture by the President of the SMA.

I wish to thank Dr Wong Chiang Yin, President of SMA and his Council for their kind invitation to lecture. I thank A/Prof Chan Yew Weng for his elegant and generous citation and Dr Toh Han Chong for his help in editing the text and inserting the appropriate cartoons to capture the ambience of the lecture, Ms Irene Ow for administrative and secretarial assistance and Mr Henry Ng for photographic assistance. ■

Editor’s Note:

Please refer to page 9 for the citation of Prof Woo Keng Thye. The full text of the lecture is available in the December 2007 issue of *Singapore Medical Journal* (SMJ).

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