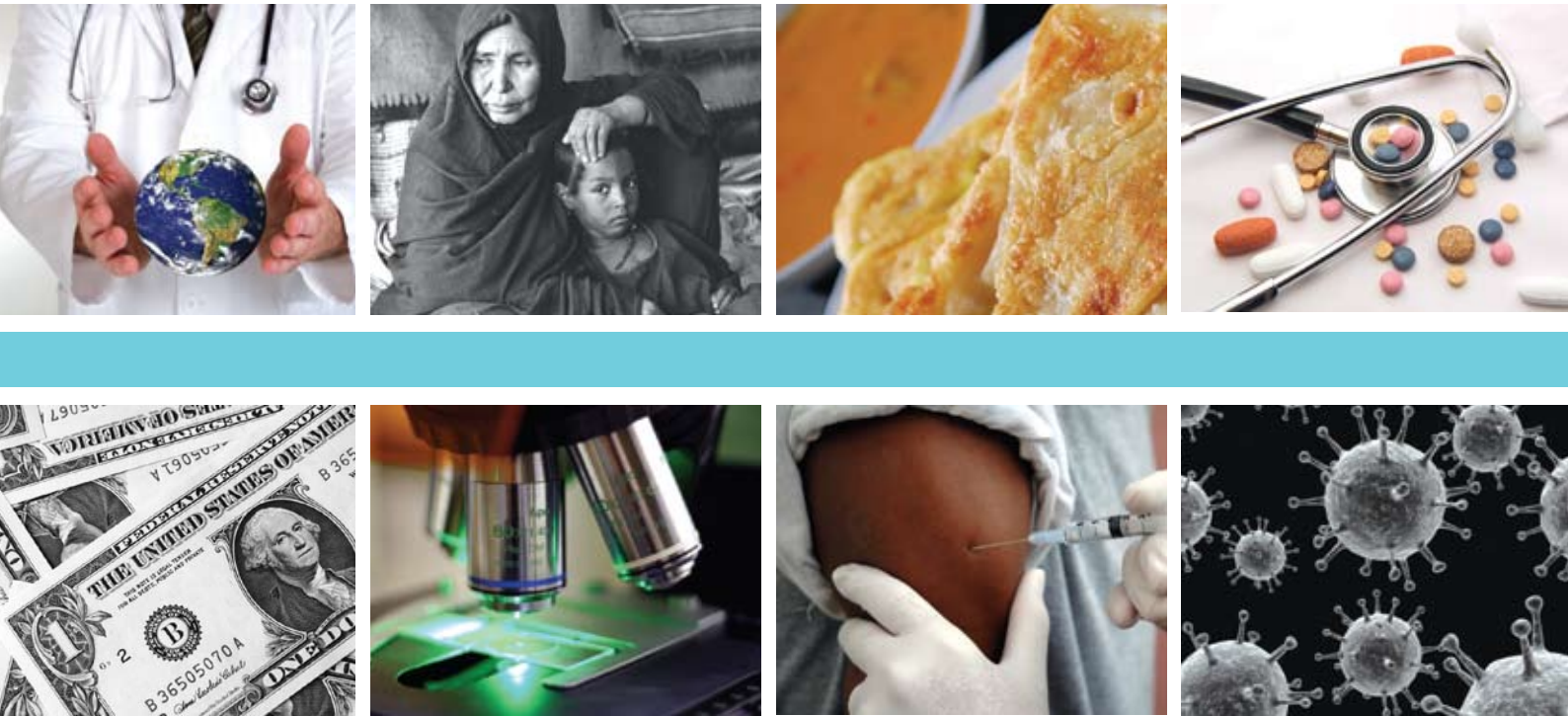


By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor



Medicines with Frontiers – Patience is Running Out

During the late 1980s, as a medical student, I enjoyed sitting in the Burger King on Praed Street in London that had an in-house TV featuring music videos from the likes of Kylie Minogue and later, *Take That*. It was a stone's throw away from the then largest sexually transmitted diseases clinic in Europe at St Mary's Hospital, a key battleground for a new and mysterious viral epidemic called AIDS, which was causing carnage and panic and killing scores of stricken patients. Another stone's throw away was Hyde Park, one of the loveliest parks in the world but a scene of terrible carnage in the early 1980s when the IRA set off terrorist bombs that killed scores of men and horses. At that time, I would never have imagined that peace would ever come to Northern Ireland, but gloriously it has. I would also not have imagined that the pathogenesis of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) would be so quickly identified, and that a new cocktail of drugs would

be able to alter the natural history of AIDS and give a new lease of life to millions of AIDS sufferers. But these have both happened. And I would certainly not have imagined that *Take That* after almost 20 years would make such a successful comeback with a Number One hit single, *Patience*. And who would imagine Kylie could look vastly better now than she did 20 years ago.

In this new year issue of the *SMA News*, we have the great privilege of featuring Professor Jim Yong Kim, Harvard Medical School Professor and a heroic visionary with a view to eradicating HIV and tuberculosis from the face of the developing world. Voted by *Time Magazine* in 2006 as one of its 100 most influential people on our planet of 6.6 billion people is no small accolade. In the June 2007 issue of the magazine *Vanity Fair*, Madonna interviewed Professor Kim where he was described as someone who “worked to bring good medicine to people without

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access”, a simple yet powerful testimony to this Korean-born, Midwest-raised physician. As a medical student, he established the international charity organisation *Partners in Health* with his Harvard colleague Professor Paul Farmer, the complementary global champion (see book review on page 20) of the world’s forgotten victims of health inequality, a passion rooted in his own underprivileged childhood, a deep Catholic faith and his first exposure to the poor and sick in Haiti as a Duke undergraduate.

The *SMA News* did not manage to get Madonna to interview Professor Jim Yong Kim. Instead, when editorial board member Dr Hsu Li Yang short-text messaged me from Boston excitedly after a fulfilling interview with Professor Kim, I could sense that Li Yang felt like a virgin, touched for the very first time.

The world is flat in the language but not the business of Medicine. Medicine transcends jurisdictions, as the war against disease is dictated by universal truisms. A spleen is a spleen and penicillin is penicillin in any language. However, the world is not flat for healthcare spending, delivery, quality, equality and outcomes. It is more like a *papadum* or a *pizza* or a *pita* or a *prata*, semi-flat with bumps filled with uneven cross-border distributions in a semi-globalised world undulating with real international, social, economic and cultural boundaries and barriers.

Big Pharma has protected powerful drug monopolies through government-backed patent laws founded on the United States Constitution. With drug costs tail-spinning into the stratosphere, more than half of the world’s people who live on less than \$2 a day will have trouble getting medicines for their diseases. It is the advent of generic drugs from countries like India and trade rules overriding patent rights that have further flattened the world for nations like Brazil and Thailand to get access to cheaper drugs for AIDS victims.

Take the hypothetical example of Ebenezer Scrooge “Chicken” McNugget III, CEO of

fictitious Big Pharma *SupaDupa*. McNugget III has enough problems on his hands than to think about offering cheaper costing of his blockbuster anti-retroviral drugs and anti-cancer drugs for developing nations. McNugget III would cluck: “The South African Government only spends \$10 per year per person on public healthcare. That sucks. It’s not my job to be playing Santa Claus to the over 5 million HIV-positive patients in that country.” Besides, McNugget III is too busy figuring out how the world’s top three Big Pharmas are now all (*gasp*) European drug companies. What is he is going to do about penetrating the China market? How can he reclaim some of that over 200 billion dollar per year business in prescription drugs in

the United States? What is going to happen when his top selling anti-impotence drug, *HardOn*, runs out on its exclusive patent? Why is his son always getting into trouble in Phillips Academy, Andover? What time is his WASPy wife’s glitzy charity auction in aid of “Fighting Inner City AIDS” in Long Island, New York, this coming weekend? One of McNugget III’s new year strategies is to

unleash even more curvy drug reps with bigger and smoother cream buns for those ever important Pharma-sponsored teatime GP talks to market their new anti-hypertensive drug, *Notanotherpine*. Accused of putting profits over people, Big Pharma has indeed gestured to reduce the cost of some drugs to developing nations to combat the likes of AIDS. But with generic drugs costing anything from 70% to 300% less than the patented original drugs, it will be these generic drugs that will lead the charge in the global war against diseases in developing nations.

In 2008 of the 21st century, let us hope that some of the urgent global crises of our time will also come tumbling down like the Berlin Wall by magical innovations, resolutions and solutions. And in this regard, Professor Jim Yong Kim and Professor Paul Farmer are two of such change agents. And just maybe, also, Keira Knightley might look even more stunning in 20 years’ time. ■

