

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin, SMA President

Canteen Talk, Canteen Philosophy

Flowers bloom and flowers wilt; like the morning dew that still covers the grass plains, pain and regret do not remain;

Clouds gather and clouds disperse; the evening winds frequently draw up old memories, and yet another year passes.

The morning of the eve of Winter Solstice was another stormy day. I was working in my office when I received an alarming short-text message from a SGH senior consultant: "Houseman Canteen is closing down! Come down today for your last bowl of 'mee pok'!"

Many thoughts and questions came to mind and I replied: "Really?!?!?"

"Next week it will be gone!"

Oh dear! As I already had a meeting during lunch that day, I hurriedly phoned a friend who worked as an administrator in SGH in an attempt to confirm the information. He explained that the Canteen was not closing down but rather the car park next to it was. The Canteen was to be relocated to a nearby site in February. But the 'mee pok' hawker may indeed call it a day. The canteen and the car park were being moved to make way for the new Pathology Building that was coming up on the same site. I heaved a sigh

of relief as I realised that there were two months before the Canteen was to be moved.

Most of our doctors would be familiar with Houseman Canteen – located in front of SGH Block 7, at a corner of Outram Medical Campus that time and the public seemed to have forgotten. The Canteen is usually smoky and crowded, and sparsely appointed, and it gives the impression of being old and somewhat run-down. Yet to us who have worked in Outram, the atmosphere of the Canteen is at once unforgettable and warm. We grew up with the Canteen; and while the world may have changed much, the Canteen remains timeless. My usual morning ritual – a cup of 'kopi-O' for 50 cents (raised to 50 cents only last year), a bowl of 'mee pok' for two dollars (note: always ask for extra black vinegar), and I am a happy man. Over the years and after numerous cups of 'kopi-O', my colleagues and I would talk shop and have our meal, and over time, we would have talked and passed comments (if not non-binding judgments) on numerous events and personalities in the medical fraternity, analysing their rights and wrongs, causes and effects, truths and untruths, gains and losses, over



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countless cups of tea and coffee; and through it all, the Canteen is always there. Consensus and friendships are built amid all this chatter.

Through the years, I have met numerous non-medical healthcare administrators and senior hospital managers. When they arrive on the healthcare scene, some of them would ask me for advice on the fastest way to understand the complex relationships and working environment in healthcare. My answer to them was always: "Hang out often in Houseman Canteen (or any hospital canteen) and drink coffee, chat with the doctors there." This suggestion may seem rather trite and to even promote idleness, but it is not so. This is the fastest way for an outsider (or even a doctor) to, through the experience of interacting in the Canteen, understand the ideals, worries and taboos of the medical profession. However, not everyone can accept my unusual suggestion. Perhaps it is because the Canteen environment is indeed too run-down for some.

Houseman Canteen is not only a good place for a meal and drink or information exchange. It actually teaches us a philosophy for life and value system. One must first know how to be a sociable and amenable person before one can become a good doctor. And the Canteen is an importable venue for such 'non-clinical' training. When a team of doctors appears in the Canteen for breakfast after a ward round, the Consultant in the team will always pay for the drinks while the houseman will have to queue for and fetch the drinks back to the table where the team is seated. This may not seem to be anything, but through the years and countless repetitions, this

unwritten rule of who pays and who queues for drinks inculcates in doctors a sense of unity, mutual respect and collegiality. This is but one example. One can say that the Canteen is the soul and lifeline of the medical fraternity working there. It can help us doctors to achieve what Confucius say are the three stages of self-improvement: to first know what one should say, and then to know how one should behave and finally to know one's purpose and destiny.

While the controversies and difficulties of the past year may have finally gone away, I still hold on to my principles: "To not cower to (unrighteous) power and to not move one's position just because of being impoverished and lowly." (Mencius) This year, I attain middle-age. Confucius says: "To be 40 is to be not beguiled." Although I am far away from the enlightened existence that the Sage described: "He who is righteous and compassionate has no worries, he who is wise is not beguiled and he who is courageous has no fear", I find that my world view of things has indeed become more simplified. I do not know what this new year holds for me, just like I wonder if the new Houseman Canteen will retain its original atmosphere and feel after its relocation to the new site.

But I do hope that in the near future, I have the opportunity to once again sit in the new Houseman Canteen – to drink my coffee and to savour life. This is because the lessons of life that can be learnt in the Canteen are never-ending.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish all of you a Happy Lunar New Year. ■