

# The Physician's Pledge – Still Relevant?

By A/Prof Chin Jing Jih

On 17 May 2008, Singapore Medical Council (SMC) held its Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony where more than 400 newly registered doctors publicly recited the SMC Physician's Pledge, a contemporary and local version of the Hippocratic Oath.

"Reciting the Physician's Pledge? In this day and age?" Even doctors expressed surprise that such an "archaic and obsolete ritual" is still being conducted in "modern Singapore". As one of them put it, pledge ceremonies are nothing more than a dinosaur from the Jurassic era when "wedding vows, business contracts and scholarship bonds still meant something and were given their due honour". However, there are also those who feel that affirming a pledge to adhere to certain professional obligations is what makes medicine a unique profession, one that proactively and publicly professes our goals and ideals.

So does this form of public promise-making ceremony still have a role in this supposedly legal-centred era of medical practice?

According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, an oath is "a solemn (usually) formal calling upon God or a god to witness to the truth of what one says or to witness that one sincerely intends to do what one says"; in other words, a solemn testimony of the truth or inviolability of one's words. One of the oldest and most famous oaths, the Hippocratic Oath, is a typical representation of this definition. Similar oaths are also sworn by public officers, the military and clergymen. The common thread in all these oaths is a solemn and formal undertaking by members to use their skills and positions of trust honourably, in the pursuit of best interests of those they serve.

So how is swearing an oath or affirming a pledge relevant to today's doctors, and for that matter, the medical profession? There can be several considerations.

## *SMC Physician's Pledge*

*"I solemnly pledge to: dedicate my life to the service of humanity; give due respect and gratitude to my teachers; practise my profession with conscience and dignity; make the health of my patient my first consideration; respect the secrets which are confided in me; uphold the honour and noble traditions of the medical profession; respect my colleagues as my professional brothers and sisters; not allow the considerations of race, religion, nationality or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient; maintain due respect for human life; use my medical knowledge in accordance with the laws of humanity; comply with the provisions of the Ethical Code; and constantly strive to add to my knowledge and skill. I make these promises solemnly, freely and upon my honour."*

Firstly, a more rights-conscious and educated public, and an increasingly legalistic culture today means that a trusting relationship with the patient and the public has become even more critical to effective doctoring. Patients generally presume that doctors will provide them with effective medical care in a respectful manner and without any discrimination. Information asymmetry and patient vulnerability is balanced by a commitment to the profession's claim to be trustworthy, competent and compassionate. It is at this pledge ceremony at the start of a doctor's career that he begins this life-long process of trust-building, by publicly acknowledging his professional obligations and making a solemn commitment to qualities such as compassion and competence that will help him achieve his professional goals.

Secondly, by taking an oath, doctors are pledging to be a certain kind of persons. It is not a mechanical act of merely reciting a list of do's and don'ts. Nor is it a temporary commitment to perform a number of short term heroic acts. The act of oath taking implies a transformation to a patient-centred practitioner. As physician and medical ethicist Daniel Sulmasy aptly commented, a change occurs in doctors participating in a pledge ceremony because of "the words they have spoken, the way in which they have spoken them, the setting in which



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Like most doctors, he too has bills to pay and mouths to feed, and wrestles daily with materialistic desires that are beyond his humble salary. He, however, believes that a peaceful sleep in the night is even more essential.



Newly registered doctors at the SMC Physician’s Pledge Affirmation Ceremony on 17 May 2008.

the speaking has taken place, and the meaning and expectations assigned to that speaking”.

The Oath of Hippocrates has often been ridiculed in cartoons or comedies as “the Oath of Hypocrisy” or the “Hypocritical Oath”. A question often raised by detractors of the Physician’s Pledge is whether the behaviour of some doctors today makes a mockery of the promises recited. Such criticisms misconstrue the meaning of a professional pledge. The public’s disillusionment with a few practitioners should not and does not invalidate the positive values and manner of practice expected of the profession. Neither should reciting or affirming a pledge alone be expected to instantly make a person morally better. The existence of errant doctors also in no way means that the only purpose of a pledge such as the SMC Physician’s Pledge is to deceive the public before whom it is sworn. Therefore, contrary to popular perception that the pledge prescribes high ideals and describes a rare breed of saintly physicians, it merely raises the floor of moral expectation for doctors. Respecting patients’ secrets, giving due respect and gratitude to teachers and constantly striving to add knowledge and skill may not be expected in many other occupations, but are expected of every doctor, whether a locum general practitioner or a top cardiologist in an academic

centre. The pledge is a verification by doctors that acts and behaviours deemed heroic and altruistic in other occupations are expected standards; this is what makes medicine unique.

It is true that the pledge affirmation ceremony only marks the beginning of a long journey. Much needs to be done individually and system-wise to facilitate doctors in honouring their pledge. However, reciting the pledge also serves as a timely reminder to doctors of the simple but inspiring reasons why they decided years ago to enrol in medical school. The Physician’s Pledge and its affirmation in a public ceremony should and must be kept alive. It is still relevant and must be taken seriously by all, as stated elegantly by Daniel Sulmasy in his book *The Rebirth of the Clinic*:

*“Physicians are ordinary persons. They are called to reach beyond the ordinary, however, toward a transcendental ideal. They are called to a life of virtue in a profession that is dedicated to a common purpose – the care of sick persons. The enterprise is inherently moral, in large part because physicians declare it to be so by the oath they swear at graduation. Physicians and the society they serve should learn to take physicians’ oaths seriously.”*

**Editor's Note: We reproduce here the speech by the Director of Medical Services, Professor K Satku, at the Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony on 17 May 2008 at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, National University of Singapore.**



## INTRODUCTION

The Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony is an important milestone in the career of our doctors. I congratulate you for having successfully journeyed to this point where you join our ranks as a doctor. Your parents, relatives, friends and teachers who have supported and journeyed with you also share in your success. I congratulate them too.

As you enter our ranks, I welcome you. You bring vitality and idealism, qualities that will sustain our noble profession.

Most of you would have just completed housemanship. Housemanship is one of the most demanding experiences in your career. This is the time when you transform theoretical medical knowledge into the practice of medicine in the real world.

And although it is said that you need the right character to be a doctor, practising medicine also moulds character. I am sure you have emerged a better person for having gone through housemanship as it brings out the best in you, intellectually, physically and emotionally.

But things can go to the extreme, so housemanship has also always been physically exhausting and emotionally draining, although we hope conditions are getting better. During my

time, we had fewer hospitals and about 80 house officers who sometimes did 10 or more calls per month. This has improved in the last 30 years but not enough. We now have about 300 house officers each year who do an average of 6 calls per month and more than 70 to 80 hours a week.

The question is: how can we improve housemanship so that it becomes a better learning experience for our young doctors? The current system of training house officers, or for that matter specialist trainees, has always been tied to the massive service delivery of our health system. Our doctors are often overwhelmed by the caseload and have little time to read up and reflect on their experience. Despite this, you have delivered essential service for our patients and I would like to thank you for that.

Moving forward, more can be done to improve housemanship so that the emphasis is shifted towards training, like it should be. The Ministry of Health will be spending \$1.9 billion over the next five years to expand the pool of doctors, nurses, pharmacists and allied health professionals. The increase in number of doctors will translate to, among others, more time with our patients, more time for training and better working hours.

I hope you too will do whatever you can to make housemanship better than it was in your time and be agents for change. Because the situation will not change if we stand back and do nothing. Worse, if like some, we too believe that the housemanship year should be a baptism of fire.

## CREATING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Apart from improving the working environment for housemen, the Ministry is looking into improving the learning environment for you, our medical officers. Many medical officers serve out their bonds as non-trainees and eventually leave for the private sector without further formal training. We see this as a missed opportunity to train our doctors and upgrade their skills.

The Ministry is putting in place measures to create a learning environment in every public sector healthcare institution by introducing a training programme for all non-trainees. This will include apprenticeship with mentoring and structured teaching sessions, empowering junior doctors to do their job better. Non-trainee doctors will be expected to maintain a logbook of cases managed under the supervision of senior doctors. The experience that has been logged can be counted towards basic specialist or family medicine training should the doctor subsequently decide to pursue postgraduate training. It would be useful for doctors who remain undecided in the first few years on which career path to pursue.

The introduction of a learning environment and the inculcation of a culture of learning will need to evolve over time. But the Ministry is sincere and earnest in our objective and so I seek your active participation in this initiative. I am sure we will all become better doctors because of it.

## REMAINING ANCHORED IN VALUES

You may have chosen to take up medicine for various reasons. I do not know what reasons or what ideals you had. Perhaps you wanted to help mankind. Perhaps you wanted to discover a treatment for an incurable disease. Perhaps your parents influenced you to take up medicine. I myself belonged to the latter group. Fortunately for me there were no medical interviews during my time, or else I probably would not be here speaking to you today.

Whatever your reasons for pursuing medicine, these will be constantly challenged in the course

of your career. Some of you, like me, entered medicine without much clarity on what being a doctor meant. Your practice environment may not be what you had wished for. Your work may not be inspiring everyday and you may be disillusioned from time to time.

I urge you to take heart and do not be discouraged. Despite its imperfections, the practice of medicine is one of the most fulfilling careers that one can pursue. As long as you stay anchored to the values of the profession and practise medicine for the benefit of your patients, you will find much joy and satisfaction in this career.

I quote Sir William Osler:

*“Nothing will sustain you more potently than the power to recognise in your humdrum routine, (as perhaps it may be thought),*

*the true poetry of life –*

*the poetry of the commonplace,  
of the ordinary man,  
of the plain, toil-worn woman,*

*with their loves and their joys,  
their sorrows and their griefs.”*

I had the fortune of having many great clinical mentors who guided me through my career and instilled in me the values of the profession. One that always comes to mind is Professor Wong Hock Boon, a paediatrician. Yes, I am an orthopaedic surgeon but my first role model was a paediatrician. Prof Wong did not look at whether a patient was rich or poor – that did not enter into his horizon. Once he looked after a patient, he was totally absorbed in it. He would go to the library to read up and discuss. He was always learning, and, as a result, always finding something new.

Even though I was a houseman, he acknowledged my input and participation in the ward round. I worked with him only for six months but the experience has guided me for a lifetime. There are many such clinicians in our midst. I would urge you to look for good role models and be inspired.

How the profession has conducted itself in the past has earned it much respect and trust from society. It is important that each of us cultivate the fundamentals of good doctoring and live up to that trust.

◀ Page 17 – *The Physician’s Pledge – Still Relevant ?*

Besides having the cognitive ability and the diligence to learn, I think one of the most important attributes is the ability to relate to your patients with humanity. Take time to listen to your patient’s concerns, hopes and fears. You will soon realise that every patient is different and each brings to you a unique set of concerns. At the heart of it, each patient is a human being, just like you and me.

In the course of your careers, there will be many distractions. With increasing commercialisation of medicine, the lure of the dollar is a real one. While you are conscientiously doing your job, you may notice other doctors who are engaged in practices that blatantly compromise the values of the profession. You may be disheartened or even tempted to follow their footsteps.

From time to time, SMC is alerted to alleged rogue practices in the medical fraternity. Unfortunately, SMC can only initiate a review of errant practices when it is surfaced in the form of a formal complaint from members of the public or from public officers. It does not have powers to initiate investigations.

The existing regulatory system which relies heavily on professionalism needs to be strengthened.

The Ministry is looking into amending the Medical Registration Act to give the Singapore Medical Council power to initiate formal investigations itself. A new investigative and enforcement arm will provide the SMC with more power to ensure that errant doctors are dealt with appropriately.

For those of you who practise medicine the way you should, you have nothing to fear.

## **CONCLUSION**

Before I end, I would just like to say once again that having reached this threshold of beginning your career as fully registered doctors, you have done well and should be proud of yourself. Take the Physician’s Pledge to heart and continue to uphold the values and ethical code of the profession. No matter what you discover medicine to be, if you practise medicine with a conscience and for the benefit of your patients, you will not regret your choice and I am sure you will have a very fulfilling career. ■