

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin, SMA President

Acceptance

It would be in early December, the holiday season, when you read this issue of the *SMA News*. It is time to slow things down a bit, take stock of 2008 and plan for the new year that is ahead. Even if this time, things are a little different – we are entering an economic downturn that is quite unknown in its breadth and depth to most of us who are in the workforce.

It would seem that the whole country, if not the industrialised world is experiencing Kubler Ross' five stages of grief on a grand scale. In varying degrees of progression and intensity, one can sense people going through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance in response to the wealth that has been wiped out in the last two to three months. For example, one can sense that Lehman Mini-bond buyers are experiencing anger and bargaining, while others have moved on and are experiencing somber depression. And some are feeling it even if at this moment, they have not experienced significant personal financial loss. It is just the overall mood of gloom and doom.

A senior investment banker whom I have known since I was in primary school told me: "Imagine you (as a doctor) are asked to treat a horde of patients without the ability to dispense medicine. That's how I feel now because I can't lend or borrow."

But eventually, we will all reach the stage of acceptance of a new equilibrium. There will be acceptance that things are not the same and will never be the same. Acceptance hopefully not in

the form of lethargic inactivity but an acceptance that life goes on and we should seize the day, albeit in a different way, while maintaining our morals and principles.

Recently, I had the good opportunity to visit the wine-growing region of Burgundy in France for a week. We visited many famous domaines and vineyards and one of them was the famous Domaine Armand Rousseau in the village of Gevrey. The grandson of the late founder, Monsieur Eric Rousseau was kind enough to bring us around his vineyards in Gevrey. One of the most famous vineyards was the Clos St Jacques site. Here, rows and rows of vines were planted very close to each other. The Clos St Jacques site was owned by quite a few owners and the vines were unmarked and unlabelled. I asked him how the different owners would know which vines were whose and would anyone handle vines or harvest grapes that did not belong to him. He replied that never happened and every one tended to his own vines and respected one another since they have all been there for generations. There was acceptance that each owned their several rows of vines and tended to them with care.

I also discovered that many domaines did not own famous sites such as Domaine Armand Rousseau but still tended to their vines with the utmost care and effort even if their wines could not command very high prices. There was acceptance that one should do the best with what one has been given. A parallel could be drawn; that the



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cheaper “village” vineyards are our subsidised patients while the famous Grand Cru or Premier Cru vineyards are our private patients.

Another case in point would be that of our now defunct Guideline on Fees (GOF). We had withdrawn the GOF reluctantly and things are beginning to settle down to a new equilibrium. People have accepted that life must go on without GOF. SMA will in its own way continue to try and reduce information asymmetry and empower the patients and our members. In this month’s SMA News, you will see our very first survey on private specialist fees (Please see page 12). It is by necessity brief, since it is a survey that requires private specialists’ time and effort to fill up and is nowhere near the comprehensiveness of GOF, but it is still informative.

Readers of the *Straits Times* would also have seen the article on GOF by Prof Lee Wei Ling and the ensuing exchange of letters in the *Straits Times Forum* between the SMA and the Competition Commission of Singapore (CCS). We will stick to our principles. Since we reluctantly withdrew GOF, we should also seek to get it back if the authorities express a change of heart. The SMA council members will be financing the \$3000 required by CCS from our own pockets. The reasons therein for this unusual decision are quite straightforward. The idea of GOF was mooted by the authorities some

20 years ago and it would be incongruent for us to use SMA funds to check with them if the existence of GOF was legal just because a new law was enacted. Hence, the personal decision by all 16 Council members to finance the payment of fees to CCS. We accepted that GOF had to be withdrawn in 2007, even as we try to get it back when the situation has changed.

The “good” news amid all this economic gloom is that a doctor’s lot always has been a bit better than the rest in a recession. We may not make as much in boom times as 30-year-old investment bankers but we make a decent living, rain or shine.

But then there are the poor. The poor will always be with us. They make little in boom times and even less in a recession. The SMA Medical Students’ Assistance Fund requires your support even more. While economic growth is stalling and more people need help as jobs are lost, costs of living have not fallen. In fact, the cost of living has gone up considerably since the SMA Medical Students’ Fund was formed slightly more than a year ago. It was with these factors in mind that the SMA council decided to increase the number of recipients of the Fund from 10 to 15 and also to increase the quantum paid to each needy medical student from \$3600 to \$4000 a year. I trust for all of us who are still making a good living with cash to spare, we will continue to donate to the Fund. Have a good holiday season. ■