

Dr Toh Han Chong, SMA News Editor

Nine Lives

Many people are not certain how happy the new year of 2009 will be, and understandably believe that

life will get even harder as the Financial Perfect Storm rages on. One prescription for the state of unhappiness is to chill out with happy people, since it has been reported by Fowler and Christakis in the December 2008 issue of the *British Medical Journal* that physical proximity to even one happy person will increase one's chance of happiness by up to 25%. Unusual in this report is

that a happy next-door neighbour will make one happier than a happy spouse.

Of course if you happen to be in the doctor's lounge next to your medical colleague who is wonderfully happy because she has found true love with your boyfriend (soon-to-be-ex or soon-to-be-trauma-patient-in-A&E), this kind of happiness surely cannot be contagious. Similarly,

sharing a drink with a friend who is ecstatically happy – because he has just bought an Aston Martin and cannot suppress his *shadenfreude*

sniggering just thinking about you squeezing your 100 kg flabby frame into your pink second-hand Chery automobile – cannot be a very happy moment either. So while overall, globalisation and capitalism have created more wealth and more jobs, and opened up more access to markets all over the world for many decades, the boyfriend-stealer and the Aston Martin-driving sniggerer can make the free market system unhappier and less morally

uplifting. Still, I believe that capitalism will have nine lives and like a feline, survive even after a fall from great heights.

But anyhow, Happiness and 2009 is looking more like an OXymoron in this *Niu* Year. As doctors, we have resuscitated patients in cardiac arrest, poured blood into patients with acute gastrointestinal bleed and in shock, and fixed



broken body bits. Some heroic cardiac surgeons may even have held and squeezed a heart to keep the patient alive. We are now beginning to see the effects of the financial pandemic, haemorrhage and shock on healthcare – from patients and health workers who have lost their jobs to the downsizing of medical tourism. There may be potential seizures to national healthcare systems and reform plans, increases in illnesses including neuroses and psychoses, the potential rise of pandemics and worsening diseases due to deepening deprivation and poorer access to adequate healthcare.

I am neither a numerologist nor a historian by any stretch of a large intestine, but looking back at years which end with the number 9 have revealed powerful upheavals that dramatically changed the course of world history. It may well be that riding the Ox in 2009 will be a painfully bumpy and globally transforming ride. Here is a sample of civilisation-changing events in history in years that end with 9.

In 1789, the French Revolution began – a bloody period in European history triggered by financial crisis and famine, conspicuous consumption, feudalism and obscene privileges of the monarchy and aristocrats. This eventually led to radical changes in the French socio-political structures and system which among other things, embraced the inalienable rights of the people, nationalism and citizenship. By 1799, the French Revolution had ended with Napoleon Bonaparte coming to power. When Henry Kissinger asked the late Premier Zhou Enlai what he felt was the impact of the French Revolution, Zhou Enlai replied, “It’s too early to say.”

In 1929, the Great Depression occurred in the United States and spread like a rabid infection across oceans.

In 1939, with World War II, a truly global military conflict began, leading to the death of over 70 million people, mostly civilians; the highest casualty count of any military conflict to this day, and led to the advent of the Atomic Age.

In 1949, the Communists took over China, leading to a chapter of massive socio-political and ideological change in the country and beyond.

In 1969, Chinese and Russian soldiers fought in a battle over the Ussuri River, confirming that China and the USSR were wartime enemies. This eventually led to the United States strengthening ties with China, the opening up of Ping Pong Diplomacy and both changed the world’s geopolitical landscape profoundly. Frank Sinatra’s “*My Way*”, Simon and Garfunkel’s “*The Boxer*” and David Bowie’s “*Space Oddity*” made their way into the top singles charts.

In 1979, Muslim clerics took over Iran and the Shah of Iran’s reign collapsed. This event catalysed the rise of Islam as a political force in the world. Gloria Gaynor’s “*I Will Survive*”, The Knack’s “*My Sharona*” and The Clash’s “*London Calling*” were the year’s classics.

In 1989, the Tiananmen Massacre in China was beamed up-close-and-personal worldwide on TV, during a year when many Socialist nations were collapsing. Market reforms by Deng Xiaoping were already in motion, but restless students and intellectuals were also driving for quicker political reform.

That same year, the Berlin Wall fell, leading to German reunification. The top pop singles of the year included Bon Jovi’s “*I’ll Be There for You*”, Phil Collin’s “*Another Day in Paradise*” and Neil Young’s “*Rockin’ in a Free World*”.

I would not dare to speculate the tectonic events that might arise in 2009. Whatever it is, the Code Blue system, resuscitation trolley, BCLS and ACLS-trained staff, bed capacity, intensive care capabilities, blood bank and everything needed to respond to the only certainty which is uncertainty, must all be more ready than ever. And it wouldn’t hurt to have some forensic pathologists around either.

As the great musical poet Bobby McFerrin once sang,

*“In your life expect some trouble
But when you worry
You make it double
Don't worry, be happy.”* ■