



WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

We need to be mindful of the trust the public has accorded to us as a collective and be cautious, making explicit when we espouse personal opinion and when we are offering facts based on robust scientific evidence.

The doctors' role has traditionally concerned patient care, diagnosing and treating illnesses. However, doctors have an equally vital role in society to play in educating the public and advocating for necessary changes to improve and protect the health of patients and the public. In fact, the word 'doctor' comes from the Latin *doc(ère)*, which means to teach. Doctors often serve as society's voice of conscience and it is no surprise that doctors are often the driving force behind leading civil society organisations. Internationally, Médecins Sans Frontières and Physicians for Human Rights, both Nobel Peace Prize winners, the National Kidney Foundation and the Children's Cancer Foundation in Singapore were all established by physicians and have changed society for the better. Nonetheless, most doctors are also employees of organisations such as restructured hospitals which often prescribe 'gag' orders and expressly forbid employees from communicating with the media or publicly expressing a view on any matters related to work. How do we reconcile these? Are the duties as an employee and those as a physician in conflict?

I would suggest that doctors continue to engage the public through

the media and other means to fulfill our duty to inform and educate. Drawing an analogy from the legal fraternity where lawyers are first and foremost officers of the court, it can be reasonably argued that doctors likewise have a higher duty to society. I recall Dr Lee Wei Ling exhorting us public sector healthcare workers in a recent *Sunday Times* article to realise that our 'employers' are not the Ministry of Health or the clusters; but the people of Singapore. This duality in practice can be a difficult path to navigate, with many grey areas to tread carefully. However, there are some fundamental principles to guide us as we play this dual role in society.

Keep employers informed.

Employers understand and appreciate the textured role doctors play in society. In my experience, it is the rare exception when employers insist physician employees remain silent on topical issues where we can contribute meaningfully to public debate. Employers simply want to be reassured that doctors will communicate responsibly with the media and bear in mind any concerns their parent institutions may have.

Not for personal glory.

We need to be very clear of our personal intent when going public on any healthcare issues. It should be and be seen that we do not stand to gain

personally from any publicity. Dr Arthur Lim, in his contribution to *"Behind the Stethoscope"* describing a patient he restored sight to many years ago, reflected that it used to be that doctors would remain anonymous or unidentified in media coverage of new technologies or charitable works. However, he remarked that these days, it sometimes seemed that personal accolades and recognition were the motivating forces instead of public education.

Be fact-based and balanced.

Medicine is often controversial and especially for new technologies or for highly emotive issues, there may be insufficient or conflicting scientific studies. We need to be mindful of the trust the public has accorded to us as a collective and be cautious, making explicit when we espouse personal opinion and when we are offering facts based on robust scientific evidence. It is also usually good practice to provide a balanced view, giving both sides of the argument before stating our own positions and why we hold them. **SMA**



Dr Jeremy Lim is Director, Research and Education in the Singapore Health Services and leads the health services research programme for the cluster. This commentary is contributed in his personal capacity.