

SMA Lecture 2009 Report

Entrepreneurship in Medicine – Resolving Conflicts of Interest in For-Profit Medical Enterprise



The SMA Lecture was instituted in 1963 and the themes are centred on medical ethics and related topics. SMA Lecturers are appointed by invitation from the SMA Council, and the Lectureship is awarded in the main to eminent and distinguished persons who have made significant contributions to medicine and the community.

This year's SMA Lecture, "Entrepreneurship in Medicine – Resolving Conflicts of Interest in For-Profit Medical Enterprise", was held on

30 January 2010 at the Health Promotion Board Auditorium. The event was met with overwhelming response, and attended by 170 medical practitioners, medical students and allied health professionals. The lecture was delivered by Dr T Thirumoorthy, a current Board member and founding Director of SMA's Centre for Medical Ethics and Professionalism. Dr Thiru is also a member of SMA's Ethics Committee and a member of the National Medical Ethics Committee. His citation was presented by A/Prof Chin Jing Jih.

Dr Thiru spoke on the commercialisation of medicine,

whereby increased efficacies by way of technological advances and specialisation were not without their problems. He argued that by focusing on the goals of prosperity and sustainability, entrepreneurship could be made to benefit medicine, especially if ethical business methods were well-employed. However, prudence should be exercised to ensure that for-profit motives be avoided, as these may drive undesirable behaviours. Medicine being a social and ethical enterprise requires the core elements of competence, ethics, and professionalism. These remain the keys to success in healthcare, emphasised Dr Thiru.

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(L-R) Dr Jason Yap, Dr Andrew Pan, A/Prof Goh Lee Gan and Dr Lee Pheng Soon.

Returning to the initial goals of medicine, he reiterated the importance of a doctor-patient relationship based on trust and confidence. Given the fiduciary nature of such a relationship, Dr Thiru also cautioned that conflicts of interest could possibly undermine the doctor's objectivity in serving patients. To manage such issues, he put forth several suggestions to ameliorate the situation, including education to better detect bias and in oneself and in others. In instances of doctor to patient disclosure, Dr Thiru deemed

the gesture ineffective unless standards of informed consent were met. Lastly, he suggested that conflicts of interest be made visible to all concerned, and available to inspection and control, in order to maintain transparency.

He also shared with the audience what he felt are seven key elements for sustainable medical entrepreneurship (see table) and concluded his lecture with the reflective comments that the medical enterprise should be based on the love of humanity, governed by ethics and professionalism, powered by mastery

of science, and administered by sound management and business methods.

After the SMA lecture, a panel discussion, "In-house Dispensary/ Pharmacy – Conflict of Interest of Extension of Care?" was held. Moderated by Dr Lee Pheng Soon, the panelists comprised A/Prof Goh Lee Gan, Dr Andrew Pan, and Dr Jason Yap. The discussion started on the premise that until pharmacies become reasonably ubiquitous and have opening hours that can serve the population adequately, self-dispensing by medical clinics is necessary for the patient's benefit. The main objective of the forum was therefore to facilitate an internal reflection and frank discussion among doctors on how in-house dispensing can continue while maintaining patient and public confidence. Valuable experience and practices were also shared by both panelists and audience on how they have been managing the conflict without compromising patient trust and welfare. A lively discussion ensued as a number of the principles of responsible medical entrepreneurship in Dr Thiru's lecture found their application. It was felt that raising awareness in the issue among doctors was a good beginning, and that it would lead to wider reflection and greater focus by doctors on ethics and professionalism.

For the full text of the SMA Lecture 2009, please refer to the *Singapore Medical Journal*. Please also see the facing page for the citation of Dr T Thirumoorthy. **SMA**

The 7 Elements for Sustainable Medical Entrepreneurship

1. Organisational Mission and Vision of Social Entrepreneurship
2. Servant Leadership
3. Organisational Culture based on Healthcare Ethics and Professionalism
4. Management of Conflict of Interests
5. Quality and Appropriate Clinical Care – Clinical Governance
6. Ethical Pricing
7. Ethical Marketing & Advertising