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Value and Retail Therapy

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

People who love to shop often astound me. I have sometimes heard of patients who get themselves into trouble by overspending and rolling over their debt on credit cards at exorbitant interest rates. A worrying statistic by the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) states that about 3.8 billion dollars have been rolled over on credit cards as of January 2010.

Granted, not all of this is due to overspending but it is a statistic that

generates great concern, as much of our lifestyle in Singapore is concentrated on the worship of retail.

I suppose that retail is really all about the experience; there are these amazingly constructed shopping malls with beautiful shops and attentive assistants who are more than willing to help you part with your money. This is even more pronounced in the high-end luxury retail segment. Perhaps some aspects of private sector medicine are also moving in the same direction. You see practices that span several

units or entire floors with plush carpets, comfortable sofas, coffee machines, lifestyle magazines and even Internet access. Some establishments resemble a hotel foyer or even an airport transit lounge. In fact, modern day medicine is about reproducing some of the lessons learnt from luxury retailing.

I remember a story I read a while ago called *Paper Moon*. The book was published in 1971 and a movie was made a couple of years later starring Ryan and Tatum O'Neal. The novel was about a confidence man, Moses Pray, and his

daughter Addie. Moses would always be accompanied by Addie and no one could imagine that he was a confidence man because of the presence of his young daughter. The setting of the novel was in the deep south of America in the 1930s. Coincidentally the movie stars playing the roles of Moses and Addie were also a father and daughter team.

In the book I recall Moses buying a suit with his fellow con man, Jake, in a suit shop. He took his time, tried on a dozen suits, flirted with the sales girl and finally bought a suit after an hour. Jake was exasperated by that time and when they were outside the shop, turned to Moses and asked him, "Why did you spend all that time in the shop and waste my time? We could have gone round the block to Jimmy "The Fence", and he would have sold you that same suit for a tenth of the price that you paid!" To which, Moses replied curtly "Hey Jake, buying retail is class, you want cheap, you go buy wholesale!"

I guess what Mr Pray meant was that when one is in a retail mode, one is not only buying the suit. The value is in taking your time, enjoying the experience, trying on several items, chatting with the sales staff about the quality of the fabric, the "drop" of the pants or the cut of the lapel. In short, the value does not just come from the item that you take home.

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Physical examinations can be done quickly but I find that taking the time to sit the patient on the couch, examining him, while talking to him provides a very good experience.

Finally, explaining the diagnosis sometimes with the aid of a diagram, chart or a table model really cements the patient's take-home basket of value. This basket of value includes the retail experience, lessons or concepts learnt from the doctor, the tests conducted and the medication dispensed.

In Asian and Confucian societies, the value is always seen in the drugs. In ancient China, consultation was seen as a humane service and the physician would only charge for herbs he prescribed. There was no Chinese concept of consultation back then. This has resulted in many Confucian societies having medical practice where the physician dispenses, as value is tied up in the drugs prescribed.

In fact as an aside, one wonders if patent drugs are worth the differential from generic ones. I suppose taking an anti-inflammatory when one is in severe pain would have the patient appreciating the performance of the drug. If there were indeed a difference between a generic and a patent, one would notice very quickly! I can say from personal experience that there is a marked difference between taking Nexium and omeprazole when one has heartburn in the middle of the night.

Hence to the patient, value is generated in many ways; some are of real value, as in a box of patent drug, a diagnostic or surgical procedure; or a radiological investigation. There is also perceived value, which is real to the patient and this comes in the form

of retail experience, a sincere and honest interaction with the doctor, an excellent opinion, and a conceptual understanding of a disease that is well-explained and delivered. Other value-generating advice includes the natural history of the disease and how various interventions will alter its course.

In today's high cost environment of medical practice in Singapore, we have to continually increase the value of our work to the patient. There are many roads to Rome and everyone has his own ideas. I believe that the way forward lies in the software of the doctor and his team, the relevant hardware in terms of diagnostic modalities, operating suites, ambulatory centres, and dialysis and intervention modalities. The plush surroundings that we see are here to stay, but are really nice distractions and a tribute to creature comforts. After all, if our charges are not commensurate with the value generated, the patients would eventually vote with their feet and stay away. Very often, they stay away for good. **SMA**



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