One People, One Nation

What does putting Singapore first in our healthcare system mean?

By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

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t’s August once again. The streets are coloured with red and white and our children and grandchildren sing “Stand Up for Singapore” and “We are Singapore” merrily as they return from school. Hospitals are busy organising National Day Observance Ceremonies, and perhaps it is timely to consider what it means for us as doctors and de facto leaders of the healthcare system to put Singapore first. Two issues are particularly disquieting for they reflect not just individual but also organisational mal-alignments, and highlight the tensions that we struggle with in balancing between organisation and country.

Clinical Service Offerings

Every hospital wants to be “special” and to be bigger and/or better than the rest. While these are natural inclinations, we are all part of a larger healthcare system, and especially for the public hospitals, profit motive or institutional ego should not overwhelm consideration for the greater good. Take for example liver transplant services. Singapore has only about 200 transplants in total performed over the last 20 years but still funds two public sector programmes. Compare this with the University of Pittsburgh, which in one year alone performs about 240 liver transplants. Similarly, the University of California, Los Angeles medical system performs about 200 transplants a year. Why, when we profess to have ambitions to be the medical hub of Asia, do we divide our already meagre patient numbers and dilute expertise across two sites?

A more prosaic example would be in
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The sum of the parts cannot be less than the whole; we have a responsibility individually, institutionally and nationally to ensure that our health system collectively cares for all Singaporeans and effectively trains future doctors and specialists, not just in our region or cluster but across all 700+ km² that make up Singapore.

Residency

The residency is the most fundamental change to our medical education system in living memory and will forever transform the training of doctors in Singapore. The journey has been rough, with raised voices and flaring tempers sadly becoming increasingly common. Yes, the introduction has been sudden and has taken many by surprise. Yes, the implementation may have been clumsy and many have suffered because of it. But the residency is not about the Ministry of Health or the Designated Institutional Official(s); it is about improving specialty training for doctors, for our juniors and their juniors.

There is a parallel with the Youth Olympic Games (YOG). I read of the “I hate YOG” Facebook group with sadness. Whatever the enmity with the government, the YOG is

when Singapore and Singaporeans, not the government, play host to the world. Singapore is not the government. Any anger against the government should be demonstrated at its rightful place, the ballot box; gloating over “failures” and operational lapses is misconceived and misdirected anger. Likewise, the residency programme is about our collective future as a medical profession and the quality of care we want to offer to our countrymen. If residency was a “patient” (which in some vicarious sense it is), some of us by our words and deeds would be failing our professional creed. By all means, raise the very legitimate grouses with the implementation, complain to the highest authorities about the brusque handling and policy U-turns, but let’s play our part in making it work. Don’t discourage our peers or sabotage efforts; we can recriminate afterwards.

“We are Singapore”?

Most of our institutions espouse putting “patients first” or “at the heart of all we do”. These patients should mean not just SingHealth, NHG, NUHS or patients from other institutions; these patients are Singapore’s patients. The sum of the parts cannot be less than the whole; we have a responsibility individually, institutionally and nationally to ensure that our health system collectively cares for all Singaporeans and effectively trains future doctors and specialists, not just in our region or cluster but across all 700+ km² that make up Singapore.