

# ZERO SUM GAME

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

We have often come across this term in our daily lives without quite understanding what sort of impact it has on us. In reality what it really means is that in a transaction, one side wins and the other side loses. An analogy is that if two persons divide a cake into unequal slices, one side loses out and the other gains a bigger piece.

In life we have often tried to overcome these zero sum games or win-lose situations with win-win situations. In the economics arena, when humans are exchanging goods or services in barter, the transaction is win-win as both sides will consider the good or service they "bought" as more valuable than the good or service they "sold". In the corollary, there are instances where both parties suffer together and enter a transaction where it is a lose-lose situation. These together with win-win transactions are also regarded as non zero

sum situations.

Why am I talking about these fancy game theories? This is because I have noticed the creeping onset of more win-lose situations and lose-lose situations in our healthcare sector.

The rising costs of medical units with parties chasing the prices into bubble territory are definitely a win-lose situation. The cost structure of practices rises as new benchmarks are set. This triggers landlords of existing units to re-price their rental upwards to increase their yields. Banks are happy to loan more money to doctors to chase units as they perceive them to be good credit risks. The reality is that this situation will continue to escalate as no one will put on the brakes.

I have realised that the banking crisis in the US and Europe were propagated in part by banks that did not price their incremental risk as the valuation of properties soared. The

loss will ultimately be borne by patients who will have to absorb the higher fees. At some point, the medical tourists will move on while the locals may have to go to the public sector or leave the country to obtain private sector healthcare. We may well become the Monaco of healthcare where if you cannot afford it, please don't even bother.

Another win-lose situation is the loss of goodwill with patients as medical fees rise in tandem with property values. In the private sector, there is tension between fees charged and the professionalism of the doctor. We are expected by society to put our patient's interests above our own. In return, society allows us the right to self-govern our profession and gives us the recognition and status that we enjoy. Hence there is a healthy tension between fees charged and the professional craft. When this balance becomes unhinged with overcharging, the



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value of the professional craft is not delivered to the patient's expectations. In poor clinical outcomes, one may encounter unhappy patients and subsequent litigious actions. An interesting observation I have gathered is the demand for refunds by patients as an option to avoid litigation.

On a more optimistic note in the New Year, we can create win-win situations with our professional colleagues. When we work together, share information, socialise, treat junior colleagues with patience and kindness, or behave deferentially to senior colleagues, suddenly the working environment enters into a positive situation. This can be real in both private and public sectors. I would like all of us to check the negativities of intrigue, manoeuvring, back stabbing, envy, jealousy and gossip at the door when we arrive at work every morning.

Yet more win-win situations can be gained by treating your nurses, allied healthcare professionals, medical students and ward assistants in a civil and kind manner. After all, we are the leaders of the healthcare team and in

today's world, the styles of autocratic, narcissistic and toxic leadership are a thing of the past. Today's effective leaders tend to have self-awareness, self-regulation, be motivated by reasons that transcend money or status, be empathic and have social skill sets. The negative examples of autocratic and toxic leaders are clear but what many do not know of are the narcissistic leaders. It is only in recent years that business publications like the *Harvard Business Review*\* have started to realise that there is a distinctive class of narcissistic leaders.

Freud opined that there are three distinctive personality types: the erotics, obsessives and the narcissists. The narcissist is independent and not easily impressed. They are visionary, experts in their own field and often go beyond their own boundaries. They pose the difficult and critical questions and are gifted in attracting followers. They do so in order to gain affirmation and really like the adulation that comes with the fan base. As their self-confidence escalates with the response to their charisma, they will rise further into emotional isolation and stop listening to information that does not gel with their vision. They are sensitive to criticism and have difficulty with their own emotions. When they perceive competition or are challenged, their dark sides will emerge. They will be derogatory, humiliate subordinates in public and descend into paranoia. Other hallmarks of their weaknesses are lack of empathy, poor listening skills, distaste for mentoring and exploitative behaviour. In addition, they are intensely competitive beyond reason.

As we move through life, we have often come across such personalities. They often start out well but eventually self-destruct and lead their organisations or departments into toxic territory. They also tend to have no succession planning as they would rather be surrounded by yes men. In quieter times, their negative traits would have surfaced early in their career and the very nature of these characteristics would have kept them in their place and prevented them from moving into top leadership positions. However in today's world where there are waves of change, innovation, uncertainty and reinvention, these personalities can emerge as the top dog through their ability to sell themselves.

In the final analysis, the essence of qualities prized in healthcare is the antithesis of narcissism and we should be aware that these toxic leadership styles have no place and should not be tolerated in our profession.

**SMA**

*\*Narcissistic Leaders: The Incredible Pros, the Inevitable Cons by Michael Maccoby, Harvard Business Review Jan-Feb 2000.*



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