

SMA Lecture 2010

Winds of Change: Revisiting Role Models in Medicine

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.

The SMA Lecture 2010, “Winds of Change: Revisiting Role Models in Medicine”, was held on 29 January 2011 at the NUHS Tower Block Auditorium, and was well-attended by medical practitioners and medical students despite a heavy downpour that started shortly before the lecture. Professor John Wong, Dean, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSoM), National University of Singapore (NUS), delivered the lecture, and A/Prof Lim Yean Teng, Adjunct Associate Professor, YLLSoM, delivered his citation.

Prof John Wong spoke on the changing medical landscape, and opined that role models are crucial as they have a strong impact on the younger generation, by acting as moral compasses as well as passing down professional values. He pointed out that there is a need for both heroes and heroines who cut across the demarcations of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Relating an example of gender in role models, he pointed out that there was a lack of female role models,

and mentioned that presently, the Heads of Departments at YLLSoM were all male.

Prof John Wong also highlighted some role models who had inspired him. These included local doctors such as Dr ME Thiruchelvam and Dr Gopal Haridas, who obtained the first FRCS and MRCP qualifications in Singapore, respectively, and changed the perception regarding the standard of doctors from Singapore. Citing American Dr Janet Rowley, he lauded her for returning to full-time research after the youngest of her four sons was 12 years old. She went on to identify the major molecular translocations that drive chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), resulting in the development of Gleevec or Imatinib, which was featured in the TIME magazine cover story on 28 May 2001.

Prof John Wong emphasised that the Singapore Medical Association had an important role to play – the responsibility to uphold the profession of medicine through addressing challenges and shaping medical legislature, and the task to hold doctors up to standards expected by the public.

After the SMA Lecture, a panel discussion on medical education was held. Titled “Meeting the Challenges of Rapidly Evolving Medical Education and Training – Response from the Profession”, the forum was moderated by Dr Toh Han Chong (Head, Department of

Medical Oncology, National Cancer Centre), while the panelists comprised Dr Sandy Cook (Senior Associate Dean, Curriculum Development, Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School), Prof Ho Lai Yun (Professor, Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and Clinical Professor, YLLSoM, NUS and Associate Dean, Singapore General Hospital Campus), A/Prof Tan Kok Chai (Master, Academy of Medicine Singapore), and Prof Wong Tien Yin (Director, Singapore Eye Research Institute).

Dr Sandy Cook opened the discussion by explaining the unique features of Duke-NUS. Each cohort consists of graduate entry students of varied diversity, and the programme aims to produce highly trained medical leaders needed to support biomedical sciences in Singapore. In response to Dr Toh Han Chong’s query if the annual intake of 50 was sufficient, Dr Cook remarked that despite the seemingly small number, the students were all potential leaders and there was the capacity to increase intake to 75.

Prof Wong Tien Yin agreed that with the presence of Duke-NUS, there was an increased push towards biomedical science. He felt that it created a positive buzz and change in the medical landscape to encourage innovation, and would encourage YLLSoM to embark on a similar emphasis.

Dr Toh Han Chong then aired some



Prof John Wong being conferred SMA Lectureship 2010 by Dr Chong Yeh Woei



Panel Discussion: A/Prof Tan Kok Chai, Prof Ho Lai Yun, Dr Toh Han Chong, Prof Wong Tien Yin and Dr Sandy Cook



Audience at the SMA Lecture 2010

Prof John Wong and his family. (L-R): Son Christopher Jen Wong, Prof Wong, wife Jen Kwong Hui and mother Dr Patricia Lim Toan Lian

Prof John Wong emphasised that the Singapore Medical Association had an important role to play – the responsibility to uphold the profession of medicine through addressing challenges and shaping medical legislature, and the task to hold doctors up to standards expected by the public.

sentiments from the ground, where many doctors wondered if changes in the medical curriculum were happening at too rapid a pace in the face of scarce resources. In reply, Prof Wong Tien Yin agreed that the journey towards becoming a clinician scientist was no doubt long and difficult, but the situation today is less challenging than before. He shared from his personal experience that life as a clinician scientist is an exciting and professionally fulfilling one. He also felt that senior faculty members could help by mentoring and facilitating their students, so that the latter would experience less difficulty than their predecessors.

Prof Ho Lai Yun explained to the audience that the Residency Programme was an initiative from the Ministry of Health to streamline postgraduate education. He felt that the current system was too hierarchical, and the Residency Programme helps to address the need for increased structure and feedback. Although the programme is seen as more rigid due to conformation to ACGME specifications, the onus would be for the profession and the Ministry of Health to work together to negotiate for a system tailor-made for the local context.

In response to the question of whether the lack of specialists was a factor resulting in the Residency Programme, A/Prof Tan Kok Chai answered that the 1993 White Paper projected that the total number of doctors had to increase from 3,600 to 5,200 by year 2000 in order to reduce the population to doctor ratio from 800 to 650. Therefore, even if the proportion of specialists were to remain at 40%, there would have to be an increase in the absolute number of such doctors. However, he highlighted the uneven number of applicants to different specialties, resulting in certain specialties requiring an urgent influx of trainees. He also

noted that for a variety of reasons, specialties such as ophthalmology and plastic surgery have become more popular than others. He reassured young doctors present that the existing Advance Specialty Traineeship (AST) programme will continue until all trainees accepted via the Basic Specialty Traineeship (BST) programme have completed their training.

A lively discussion ensued as a member of the audience asked if the targeted intake of 500 medical students a year was too high. Prof Wong Tien Yin opined that a diversity of paths would lead to more choices being available. A/Prof Tan Kok Chai agreed that with greater divergence into clinical education and clinical research tracks, we might need even higher numbers. In addition, he noted that there might be more doctors wanting to work part-time, in particular female doctors who wish to devote more time to their families.

In response to a medical student's query over how they could have a better idea of the different career paths available, Prof Wong Tien Yin encouraged them to speak to their clinical teachers in the public hospitals to learn more about the new areas and opportunities present. Prof John Wong emphasised that as medical education is highly subsidised from the public purse, doctors have the responsibility to address the needs and expectations of the public they aim to serve. These may differ drastically from the perception of the medical profession. For example, a four-month wait for an appointment with a cardiologist is considered too lengthy by patients, and would require more resources allocated to shorten the waiting time, sometimes at the expense of medical manpower for research and education. Lastly, he also suggested that students use their four-month elective postings to help decide on

their future path of specialisation.

A student currently enrolled in Duke-NUS questioned if the current period of exposure to research in the medical curriculum is sufficient for one to become engaged in medical research. In reply, Prof Wong Tien Yin shared that the educational infrastructure available to develop the competencies required of a clinician investigator is far more developed today. Dr Sandy Cook agreed, and elaborated, as an example, that the year spent on research under the Duke-NUS curriculum was aimed at giving students a taste of research, with the hope that interested students would be inspired to pursue the MD PhD track.

Dr Wong Chiang Yin commented that as the system is complex and constantly evolving, it is no longer an easy task to advise students when they ask if they should decide on specialisation at an early stage of their medical career. A/Prof Tan Kok Chai commented that he could empathise with the situation and felt that young doctors should not feel pressured to make premature decisions on specialisation, and their careers should not be unduly disadvantaged by waiting until they are more certain, as long as they have good aptitude and attitude. He added that most departments would pick those whom they had worked with before, and he would therefore advise doctors to first widen their exposure and experience rather than rush into a specialisation. Prof Ho Lai Yun agreed, stating that it was more disastrous to enter a choice that one was unsure of, in contrast to taking a longer time but being more certain of one's eventual choice.

For the full text of the SMA Lecture 2010, please refer to the Singapore Medical Journal. Please also see the facing page for the citation of Prof John Wong. **SMA**