

■ Report

Bringing About Change

SMA-MPS Workshop on Managing Difficult Patients

By Denise Yuen



If dealing with difficult patients in your job as a healthcare professional is a frequent occurrence, you are not alone. Studies have shown that approximately 15% of clinical interactions are classified by doctors as “difficult”, and that doctors who received training to improve their communications skills reported a significantly lower rate of difficult interactions.

As such, the Medical Protection Society (MPS), in conjunction with SMA, officially launched a new workshop, Mastering Difficult Interactions with Patients, at Sheraton Towers Singapore on 5 July

Dr Mark O'Brien warming the audience up by getting them to introduce themselves



2011. About 20 people, comprising of doctors and lawyers, attended the launch event, which was a condensed version of the actual workshop.

The speaker, Dr Mark O'Brien, International Programme Director, Education Services, MPS, commented that dealing with difficult patients is one of the greatest stressors faced by doctors, and hence is a topic which resonates strongly with them. He noted that difficult interactions are caused by four types of factors, namely patient, clinician, disease and system factors, and asked the workshop participants to give examples of such factors. The doctors in attendance were very forthcoming with their answers, and shared examples such as unrealistic expectations (a patient factor), a lack of training (a clinician factor), medical complications (a disease factor) and time pressures (a system factor).

Dr O'Brien noted that the behaviours exhibited by difficult patients are actually similar to those of typical teenagers. Therefore, to manage difficult patients, doctors have to demonstrate good "parenting" skills. He went through some of these skills and strategies to help doctors work with difficult patients more effectively. These skills are based on the support/tension model for change. Support skills include active listening, empathy for the patients and reframing their behaviour, whereas tension skills include acknowledging the difficulties of the situation and stating boundaries. Participants then watched a video in which a doctor employed the use of such skills to manage his difficult patient successfully.

Participants who attend the actual workshop can expect a highly interactive experience, with short didactic presentations, reflective exercises, small group facilitated discussions, group activities and role plays. Its format has been specially designed to allow for a mix of lectures, discussion, critical reflections and evaluations, to enhance participants' learning.

Mr Matthew O'Brien, General Manager, Education Services, MPS (Asia Pacific), said that the launch of this workshop is part of MPS' expansion of risk management education, and they hope to continue collaborating with and complementing professional bodies like SMA, to provide essential training to healthcare professionals.

Dr Chai Ping, who attended the event, felt that this workshop is a good idea. He added, "During our time, we didn't have such courses until I became a consultant. So we should send the younger doctors for this course. Start them young. For them, interaction with difficult patients is a frequent occurrence, as they have new patients daily. This is unlike consultants, who run their own clinics and see the same patients every day."

The Mastering Difficult Interactions with Patients workshops will start in September. If you are interested in attending, please email Margaret at margaret@sma.org.sg. [SMA](http://www.sma.org.sg)

Mr Matthew O'Brien answering a query

