

The Work of the SMA: Body, Soul and Spirit

Editor's note: The following is an edited version of the SMA President's speech at the SMA Annual Dinner on 13 May 2007 at the Raffles Town Club. The other reports will be published in the June issue.

Since the last SMA Dinner, many things have come to pass in the medical community and healthcare sector at large. Medisave for chronic diseases has been implemented. The list of medical degrees acceptable by SMC has also been enlarged. And of course, the withdrawal of the SMA's Guideline on Fees.

These are not what I would consider tectonic shifts. But they do represent changes to the operating environment that the medical profession lives in. In terms of professional fees, we are moving from a black and white world to an increasingly grey one. And SMA will have to face up to these new challenges and help members meet them as well.

In such times, SMA needs to have a sustainable business model for itself and also for individual doctors. And putting patients first is the only sustainable business model the current SMA leadership knows of that works for SMA and for each of us as individual doctors.

When I first joined the SMA Council in 1994, life was a lot simpler. Email was not widespread at all and the Council met monthly to deal with issues. We still meet monthly now, but really the majority of issues are dealt with by emails everyday. The Council works 24-7 and it is not uncommon to receive 20 to 30 emails everyday on SMA matters. The composition has also changed somewhat. I am happy to announce that for once,

we have more than one woman in the Council – we now have three. I think we have a good Council that will be able to rise to the current and future challenges.

This is our 48th year of existence. SMA came to be when Malaya attained self-government in 1959. The then-Malayan Branch of the British Medical Association withdrew from Malaya and generously left some of its assets behind. These were shared equally between the Malaysian Medical Association and us. We now have 4900 members or about 70% of all registered doctors in Singapore. By next year, we will have crossed the 5000 mark of paying members, ahead of our 50th anniversary. This makes us the largest voluntary and independent medical professional body by far in Singapore. We have been able to attract wide support from doctors because we have been independent and relevant. We have kept to our guns and kept the faith with patients and doctors alike. What we say matters because people know SMA is not a self-serving lot. In other words, we have significant brand equity. This is SMA's most important asset. This is the medical profession's most important asset.

Last week, I was given a copy of a book that will soon be available in our country's bookstores. Most of you will be familiar with the book titled "Chicken Soup for the Soul" and its variants and spin-offs. The book I received was "Chicken Soup for the Singapore Soul". Singapore is the first Asian country to have its own version of the book, which consists of 61 inspiring stories featuring Singaporeans.

The stories were written by a local reporter with the approval of the original American



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*Published by the Singapore Medical Association, Level 2, Alumni Medical Centre, 2 College Road, Singapore 169850.
Tel: 6223 1264
Fax: 6224 7827
Email: news@sma.org.sg
URL: <http://www.sma.org.sg>
SMA Reg. No.: ROS 198/59 TAP*

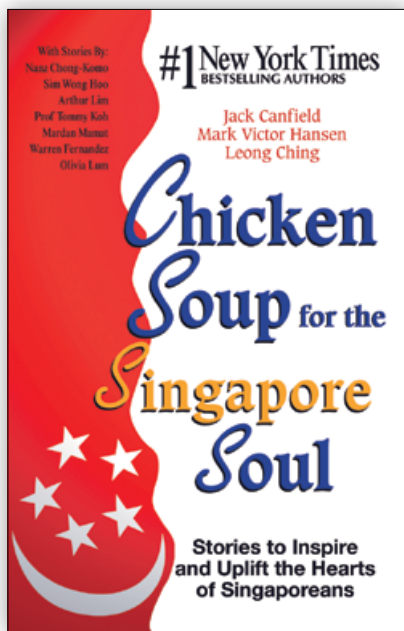
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founders of the “Chicken Soup for the Soul” series. I scanned through the book briefly and noticed that out of the 61 persons featured, 11 were doctors, who constitute the largest single group of people featured in the book. Some of them talked about their medical work and some talked about various aspects of their private lives. I know the writer personally and I know that she is not married to a doctor and none of her parents or siblings happen to be doctors. So I was curious and I asked her why there were so many doctors featured in the book.



Her reply to me was: “Why there are so many doctors? I did not set out to get them. I set out to get inspirational life-changing stories and ended up with a large number of doctors. There were many more but I ran out of space. All this of course should not be surprising to people who take the measure of their lives not by their pay check but by the number of people they heal.”

I found those to be reassuring words. I am confident that as long as doctors can be seen to be role models for society, we will remain in this virtuous cycle of being able to attract the best among our youth to become doctors and to join the SMA. This augurs well for the profession and for healthcare in general in Singapore.

Tonight, we honour members of our profession who we think embody best the values we need to reinforce and propagate. Prof Foo Keong Tatt and Dr Lee Suan Yew are unequivocal icons in our profession. We need to have more such icons. Each year when the council decides on who to put up for honorary memberships at the AGM, a nagging thought always appear

“.....I set out to get inspirational life-changing stories and ended up with a large number of doctors. There were many more but I ran out of space. All this of course should not be surprising to people who take the measure of their lives not by their pay check but by the number of people they heal.”

- Writer of “Chicken Soup for the Singapore Soul”

within me – who will be the icons in the following years? We have been fortunate that we have not had much problems looking for the next icon to honour. But we have to guard against the terrible prospect that if the system is wrong, and wrong people are put in charge of our medical schools, hospitals and professional medical bodies, we may one day run out of icons. We go from a virtuous to a vicious cycle in double quick time.

In our Council Room inside the SMA Secretariat, there are large wood panels that reach to the ceiling. Most of you would not have seen it before. On the panels are inscribed the names of persons who have held the posts of Honorary Secretary and President since 1959. 25 persons have held the post of President before me and I consider myself the least of those whose names are on these hallowed panels. Every time I look at these panels, I am reminded of the determination, dedication and selfless work my predecessors had put into SMA: the work of the SMA cannot be measured in terms or years, it is a commitment by many lives, over many lifetimes to the same timeless ideals.

The work of an independent and relevant SMA has always been, is and will continue to be:

1. To keep the body of the profession together,
2. To strengthen the noble soul of medicine, and
3. To uphold the spirit of service to humanity.

These are high ideals and a heavy burden. But the principles and work will not change on my watch.

Acknowledgement: We wish to thank Marshall Cavendish Editions for allowing us to use the cover of “Chicken Soup for the Singapore Soul: Stories to Inspire and Uplift the Hearts of Singaporeans”. The main authors of this book are Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen and Leong Ching. ■



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