

Why Are We Here?

Opening Address by Dr Wong Chiang Yin, SMA President,
at the Cheque Presentation Ceremony of the SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund

Good morning, thank you all for being present today. A big thank you to Prof Tan Chorh Chuan for gracing the occasion as our Guest-of-Honour. The Dean, Prof John Wong, for giving SMA his strongest support in this project as well as to all the staff of the NUS Development Office. I want to offer my appreciation to my council members and secretariat staff who have worked so hard for this, especially to my Social Concerns Committee Chairman, Dr Tan Sze Wee. I would also like to recognise the contributions of some corporate donors, including the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation, which has generously donated to the Fund this year in 2008. Of course, I must not forget to mention the student volunteers from MedSoc who helped to sell Christmas cards at various hospitals to raise funds. The SMA also thanks the Government of Singapore for matching dollar-to-dollar the funds raised with a corresponding endowment fund grant.

Some of the toughest questions are also the shortest ones. A tough question to answer is often the question of "Why are we here?"

Why are we gathered here today? Frankly, we are not here for the glory of SMA, to announce how much we have collected for NUS. That is the least of my concerns. In fact, let me state at the onset that SMA takes absolutely no credit for the money raised. All credit goes to the donors who parted with their money for this cause.

We may be here because we want to highlight the fact that some medical students are in need. But that is not the main reason why we are here either.

We are not even here for the love of NUS or its medical school, the medical school that many

of us grew up in. Because I can tell you that the largest single individual donation we have received: a donation of \$20,000 plus another \$80,000 pledged over the next four years, making a total of \$100,000, came from a doctor who was neither born in Singapore nor studied in NUS. So he could not have donated the \$100,000 out of gratitude to NUS, because he never did study in the NUS. Indeed several donors to the Fund are not NUS graduates.

This man, whom I shall describe as a most humble and simple man is so low-profile that he does not even want to be here today. But he did tell me that he was strongly discouraged by his son to give to this Fund. The son told his father that giving to NUS to help needy students will only make it easier for NUS administrators to raise tuition fees. I reassured this specialist that this will not be so and the Fund will go directly into the pockets of needy medics to help with their everyday expenses. The son is a NUS graduate who prefers to help his classmates directly and not through NUS.

Which leads us to a touchy topic – tuition fees for our medical school. It is now about \$18,000 a year. No matter how much we agree with NUS that tuition fees are already heavily subsidised, \$18,000 is a significant burden indeed for at least the poorer half of Singapore, should a family have a child who has the expensive ambition and ability to become a doctor.

But first, let us also acknowledge that NUS has a very tough mission. It aims to be one of the best universities in the world while it also has to remain as the people's university for Singaporeans. It is good to note that unlike my time, NUS has now put in place several schemes

to help poorer students over and above what the Ministry of Education (MOE) provides.

Having spent most of my working life in the public sector, I can tell you as a hospital administrator, one can almost always justify a fee hike for a subsidised public service on paper. It is **NOT** difficult to show mathematically why a hike is necessary on a spreadsheet. The real test is whether administrators can sincerely convince themselves that the hike is correct after fully understanding the impact and empathising with the difficulties that the poorer half of society will face as a result of their decision to have a fee hike. If having thought through and felt through the pain that a fee hike will engender, one is still convinced that the hike is utterly necessary, then by all means, have the hike. The problem is fee-hike decision-making is similar to a doctor facing a patient in great pain: it is easier to cope by being unfeeling than feeling.

And that is all I have to say about tuition fees and fee hikes today.

Back to the Fund. Ostensibly, the Fund exists to help poor medical students. We are here to honour the doctors who collectively last year gave \$186,770. GPs made up 34% of donors, specialists 57% and the remaining 9% of donors came from junior doctors in training, retired doctors and others. The single largest donation for 2007 came from an ophthalmologist in private practice who gave \$50,000 while the largest donation and pledge amounting to \$100,000 over five years came from a specialist whom I had already described. Interestingly, even my SMA Secretariat staff gave! Donations are still coming in this year. On behalf of the SMA, I offer our deepest appreciation and gratitude to all these donors.

TALENT AND MERITOCRACY

Helping these students is very important, but the Fund means something more fundamental than that. The Fund is about affirming the values that will ensure that our profession stays great in Singapore.

I can think of two such values.

The first is talent. Nurturing the medical profession is no different from running a hospital, a medical association or even a country. You need to get the best talent you can find. Medicine in Singapore has got to attract the best and brightest. As long as we keep this up, we have a fighting chance of staying on top of the game. And talent

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– Dr Wong Chiang Yin, President, SMA

does not equate to the ability to pay when one is 19 years old.

The second is our belief in compassionate meritocracy. Compassion is a word all doctors are familiar with but meritocracy is an oft-misunderstood word. Some think that meritocracy means the best are meritorious and hence they deserve more. There is almost an entitlement mentality to it. How much more? Some say the best get the most. Some even say this is the age of the superstars and the best get practically everything. This is rapacious behaviour and not in line with the original intent of meritocracy.

The truth is meritocracy is a relationship between two groups of people: “the best” and “the rest”. The best actually create better welfare for the rest through their abilities. The rest then allows and supports the best getting more. If the best only cares about grabbing more and more for themselves without sparing a thought on how to improve the lives of the rest, then the rest will not support meritocracy. Remember – “the rest” vastly outnumber “the best”.

Therefore, the best must know they have to give back something to the rest for meritocracy to prevail. This is a compassionate kind of meritocracy, but it is also probably a self-sustaining one. We do not just want the most competitive students with the highest ‘A’ Levels or IB scores and so on in medical school. We want the brightest students with the right ideas about meritocracy. Rapacious meritocracy is non-sustainable in the long run.

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This Fund therefore seeks to reinforce these values – that the medical profession wants to attract the best and finest youths into its ranks and that compassionate meritocracy is the framework we subscribe to for this to happen. This is not a once-off SMA project but a commitment by SMA for years to come. When a doctor gives to the Fund, he is sending forth three related messages:

- a) The first is he wants to make sure that our medical school continues to attract the best, regardless of their ability to pay.
- b) The second is that as a beneficiary of meritocracy, he wants to give something back to society because society has given him much.
- c) The third is he wants society at large to continue to provide the conditions that support a sustainable form of meritocracy for the practice of medicine.

Quite a few donors have told me that they hope beneficiaries of this Fund will contribute to the Fund or return the money to the Fund when they become doctors. Not that these donors want their money back but rather this money can go to help future needy students and also to keep this virtuous circle of compassionate meritocracy going. I hope the students who are here today, especially the recipients of the Fund will remember this point, even if they remember nothing else from this speech.

Finally and once again, to all our past, current and future donors for giving to the SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund, my deepest gratitude. You are why we are here. Because you give the SMA leadership confidence that the SMA is on the right track and you foment hope that the medical profession will continue to attract youth with the best abilities and finest values.

As the motto of the Medical Society of our medical school goes "Not Pride of Knowledge but Humility of Wisdom".

Thank you. ■

HOW YOU CAN CONTRIBUTE:

Make A Donation

Donations of any amount are welcome. You can make a one-time donation, or even annual contributions.

"Adopt A Medical Student"

Pledge at least \$1,800 and you would have helped to cover at least half a year of the medical student's basic living expenses.

Donations can be made by cheque or credit card. Please note that cheques should be made payable to "National University of Singapore". Kindly indicate on the back of the cheque that it is for the "SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund".

Please look out for the donation form included in this month's mailbag.

You may also visit our website at:

http://www.sma.org.sg/registration/forms/student_fund/form1.html