



By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

I was fortunate enough to attend a one-week course at Insead in Fontainebleau, France in late 2007. This was conducted by the World Medical Association and was targeted at the leadership of national medical associations.

One of the courses that we were taught was on cultural differences. We learnt many interesting ways to measure societies, from the indices that measure masculinity, individualism, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation. One of the interesting indices that I learnt was known as the power distance ratio. This ratio measured the inequalities of power and wealth within a society. A high ratio meant that these inequalities were allowed to grow.

One can see all this even in our clinics where patients enter and are intimidated by the environment. There are tools of the trade, computers, desktop spirometers, those

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3D relief anatomical wall charts, ECG machine, autoclaves all positioned within the consultation room for want of space, but also to remind the patient of the power distance ratio.

On the other hand, we have those nice aesthetic clinics where the furnishings are soft yet opulent to remind the patient that they are modelled after anything but consultation rooms. We are served espressos while waiting and can read the latest edition of *Vogue* magazine.

What it all boils down to is the distance between the patient and the doctor. In today's world, where the

competition is keen and where the business model in private practice is the free market, the distance has to narrow. We have to be approachable, friendly, informative, humorous and be willing to engage the patient. Clearly the doctor of high authority, monosyllabic answers, aloofness and lack of eye contact with a whole wall of plaques and diplomas behind him on the wall – is someone glued to the past.

I attended the course conducted by MPS recently on risk management and was surprised to discover that humour was an important part of bedside

manner. Being humorous apparently reduces the chance of unpleasant incidents or legal suits occurring between doctor and patients.

This brings to mind a situation that had occurred to a colleague of mine; he had an altercation with an aggressive patient and both refused to back off. The patient upped the ante and called in a newspaper reporter. There was a resultant fiasco as expected. The way I saw it, it really came down to a question of "face".

*Face* is a very complex concept, I was asked to explain it to my Caucasian course-mates at Insead and it took me some time to figure it out. What I concluded was this: all of us have a virtual piggy bank that we carry with us, storing goodwill. The idea of the game is to aid people with whom we interact to store up as much goodwill as possible with them. Obviously, goodwill is accumulated through helping acts, being kind, paying personal attention and generating warmth in an interaction; even with an encounter that is fleeting and casual.

Now this is harder to describe, but you can generate goodwill from a distance. Let me explain. My aunt in London has a daughter named Alice who went to school with Alex. Alex is coming through Singapore and my aunt has asked me to take care of him. Alex comes to Singapore, I bring him out for a good meal, drive him around and show him the sights.

Alex is very happy as I have deposited goodwill in his piggy bank. If I go to London and call on him, he will likely reciprocate. At the same time, I have deposited goodwill into the piggy bank of my cousin Alice, for taking care of her classmate. Finally I have also put goodwill into the account of my aunt, the person who initiates the request. Now if I go to London, I can probably stay at my aunt's house *gratis* and my cousin Alice will also bring me out for a meal!

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Essentially the currency of *Face* is goodwill. I have generated *Face* for my aunt in the eyes of her daughter and her classmate Alex. I might have even generated *Face* for my mother when my aunt calls her sister and tells her what a great son she has brought up!

The corollary of the above would be the loss of *Face*. As with yin and yang, the loss of *Face* is likely to be translated into the deduction of goodwill from the piggy bank and perhaps the generation of "ill will". In the mathematical sense, there is not only the subtraction of numbers but there may even be the generation of "negative integers" like the minus scale of temperature. To correct "ill will", one might need huge infusions of goodwill but in certain situations, even that might not be able to wipe out the deficit. Hence, to avoid such a catastrophic situation, it is better to take a detour and to steer clear of the confrontation. The way out according to Chinese intelligentsia is also called "getting off the stage".

Enough of *Face* and its intricacies, one is better off not having to deal with such complexities. Nevertheless it is the lifeblood of many societies and constitutes a huge complex, an intangible and virtual economy.

In the world of medical practice, one goes through one's career hoping to come out at the end of it unscathed by difficult patients, preferably never having to consult the MPS lawyer for assistance or be hauled up in front of a disciplinary tribunal. As medicine involves interacting with all manner of patients with different perceptions, intellect or lack of, agendas, quirks and idiosyncrasies, it can be daunting for the doctor to navigate through these minefields.

It is important that one should hone one's EQ, have an understanding of the cultural differences, be armed with sincerity and honesty, then go forth and take on the task at hand. One cannot underestimate the difficulty of the situation but with alert reading of the emotional flux of the parties involved, one should be able to instinctively feel one's way through.

As for myself on a personal note, it has been an exhausting first five months in office dealing with the stakeholders of the healthcare sector in the midst of the H1N1 pandemic; and I pray that my humour and the various humbling lessons I have learnt along the way will keep us all in good stead for the rest of my term. **SMA**



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