



Degrees of Freedom and Rational Choices

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

I am sure our patients also exercise “rational” choices... Having a big welcoming smile, asking what we can do for them, listening intently to their history, feeling their vibes of despair, expressing sincerity in our discussions and at times generating humour to defuse tension. All these count in their rational choices of making you their trusted doctor.

The other day I read with interest as Google had a run in with the Chinese government. China's geopolitics is not my usual cup of tea but I use Google on a daily basis and was thus interested to follow the story. In fact Google is so much a part of my daily life that I use the word as a verb; I will tell someone

that you just need to “Google” this or that particular topic.

All this led me to think about the effect of the search engine on my daily living. In my office in between patients or during a lull period, I am able to use my Mac and broadband to access anything from medical data to the latest trends in stocks, fashion or entertainment. In a sense the Internet is a window to the world and despite

being physically stuck in my office, I am otherwise freely roaming the world at large and looking for things that I need or that interests me.

The Internet really took off in the late 90s and I still remember the pre-historic days without it. Searching for medical data meant taking a trip down to Sepoy Lines or Kent Ridge to access the medical library. If you wanted to read something, the print

media was just about the only avenue. Calling or paging your friends was the only access to speedy communication and if you wanted to buy something, you had to go to the shops. If you felt that some distributor in Singapore was ripping you off on a certain product, you had no other options like eBay.

Today we have been set free of all these restraints and this freedom has given us options and choices. The reality is that as a well-trained professional with certain skill sets and resources, our range of options has suddenly widened. We can decide on how we want to live our life. We can choose our career path, terminate our bond, leave for private practice, work overseas, or join an NGO like Médecins Sans Frontières; frankly the world is your oyster.

Just as we have gained our freedom, our patients have also gained theirs. They too have resources and options and therefore should be treated with respect. Respect means giving them choices and options when discussing treatments and courses of action.

In private practice, this can range from discussing differential diagnoses and the cost benefit of blood or radiologic investigation, to the cost versus risk versus benefit analysis of each drug, biologic, invasive radiology or surgical procedure. Time spent in a consult on these matters provides tremendous value to the patient and he is not likely to begrudge the consult fee when it delivers the value.

In our profession, trust is the fundamental foundation of the doctor-patient relationship and is very often hijacked by short-term considerations such as the need to ensure the patient does not go elsewhere to purchase his drug or that the patient decides on surgery to be done as soon as possible without a second opinion. This erodes

trust and does not gel with today's world of varying degrees of freedom. In an emergency, the patient's options become limited by time and urgency. At this point in time, he has to rely on the trust between him and the doctor to seek the best way forward.

With this freedom, comes the flip side of the coin. We have to exercise rational choices, as the menu on our plate is extensive. Rationality here does not just involve cold hard logic. Very often the rationality is governed by many considerations such as emotions, goodwill and trust.

My weekly trip to my fruit seller is a case in point. I go to him because I trust his selection of good quality fruit, his ability to import an exotic range, and his knowledge on the varieties, storage and ripening of fruits. I also like his warm laugh, his perpetual smile and the fact that he remembers all my children's names. The retail experience is good every Sunday and I look forward to the ritual of buying my fruit every weekend.

I am sure our patients also exercise "rational" choices as I do with my fruit seller. Having a big welcoming smile, asking what we can do for them, listening intently to their history, feeling their vibes of despair, expressing sincerity in our discussions and at times generating humour to defuse tension – all these count in their rational choices of making you their trusted doctor.

Even the difficult patients may have a good reason to be difficult. Perhaps they have had a bad day at work, they do not value their relationship with you, and there are troubles aplenty at home ranging from financial to relationships to family woes. Sometimes for the young teenager, it can be as simple as looking unattractive because they have a nasty cystic pimple on their forehead. If we somehow could be omnipotent and know every single

operating factor in the makeup of our patients, we would have no trouble understanding the most difficult of them. As the saying goes, there is indeed some method in the madness.

Finally what does freedom and choice mean for us? We have to recognise that the world is a different place. We cannot be autocratic with our patients and similarly as parents, we cannot be unreasonable with our children. Yes one can be autocratic but soon patients will exercise the natural choice of voting with their feet. The more empowered ones may go to the press, write letters to the various authorities and even approach regulators. The way forward is to have purpose, deliver value, respect their choices and there will be patients beating a path to your door. Similarly I hope to have a more sophisticated approach with my children and do not wish to be estranged from them; I hope that my kids will continue to enjoy my company as much as I have enjoyed the company of all of you. I wish you all a Happy Lunar New Year. SMA



Dr Chong is the President of the 50th SMA Council. He has been in private practice since 1993 and has seen his fair share of the human condition. He pines for a good pinot noir; loves the FT Weekend and of course, wishes for world peace...