

Hercules & the Hydra

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

I was asked the other day to give a talk to some private bankers, as they had clients who were doctors and were seeking to understand them.

I started my talk by explaining a bit about the history of medicine. Medicine originated as a body of clinical craft and art, with science and technology inserted into the body towards the second half of the last century. Hence medicine is a hybrid of clinical art and science reminiscent of a cyborg or cybernetic organism.

The starting point of patient contact is really a complaint and if the patient stayed at home and did not make the trip to your office, you really could not help him. Hence medicine is an art of handling complaints. The starting point of a complaint like chest pain or a sore throat would result in a form of thinking in evaluating the complaint; ending up in an algorithm of sorts. Very often the clinical art would be listening to the patient and questioning him in the context of that algorithm, and deriving a working diagnosis. The science would come later in the context of ordering a diagnostic test to confirm the diagnosis and prescribing a treatment like a drug or procedure to cure the patient.

But what medicine really boils down to is a fight against disease. I have a somewhat romantic view of this fight; at times the doctor feels like Hercules fighting the Hydra. Disease is like the Hydra; it comes in all forms and guises. You chop off one head and two heads grow back in its place. It's breath and blood are poisonous and just when you think you are good in your craft, it strikes down a patient of yours to show you who the boss really is!

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The only weapon we have against the Hydra is the Truth. We have to seek the truth and use our clinical guile and acumen to find out what is really going on in the patient's body and mind. We are humbled and shaped by our ongoing fight against disease; it shows no mercy and gives no quarter.

A distinguished member of our alumni was once asked which profession made a good politician, in particular was a doctor or a lawyer more suitable for the role? He answered that a doctor made a better politician as he was trained to seek the truth whereas the lawyer was trained to take sides. Indeed to kill the Hydra, we need the sword of Truth.

Yet another aspect of this search for Truth is the fact that we are trained to be critical of what seems to be factual to most lay people. If the blood test or the radiology does not correlate with the patient's condition, then our assumption is that there is an error and we should repeat the test or find a diagnostic with higher sensitivity. We have often heard our professor drill into us that we are to treat the patient and not the x-ray! Indeed the patient is where the Truth resides.

Part of this sceptical approach to blood tests and diagnostics is ingrained into our autonomy. We are trained to work independently and autonomously. I used to say if we "Shanghai'ed" a doctor and put him in the middle of deepest and darkest part of the Amazon rain forest with his equipment, drugs and medical books, he would first start work amongst the natives and worry about getting back to civilisation later!

Enough of these romanticised notions; the bankers then asked me how doctors make investment decisions. I told them that doctors would make investment decisions like clinical

decisions. We make clinical decisions quite rapidly; our consult times can be really fast as seen in a busy polyclinic. We are used to making quick and incisive decisions. Very often doctors tend to look at investment decision-making in the same vein, rightly or wrongly. In contrast, most financial people I know would construct massive spreadsheets with lots of assumptions before they take on an investment decision.

Yet another interesting question was why Singaporean doctors prefer property investments and nothing else, and for male doctors, does the key to their investment decision-making lie in the opinion of their wives?

For the first question, I tendered the fact that our outlook is conservative; we are comfortable with property as an investment in Singapore where property prices have always peaked at higher values than the peak of the previous cycle. As for the second question, I remarked that for most males, let alone doctors, the decision-making for investments does rest with their wives. Being a doctor was a coincidence in this aspect! I received huge approval with applause from the female members of the banking audience on this point.

I also went on to talk about the life cycle of a doctor, from medical student to resident, from registrar to consultant and then finally from public sector to private sector. Some interesting observations were that we worked very hard in the formative years of our career to accumulate the clinical know-how and expertise. Perhaps because the knowledge base is so huge and the fact that we learnt most of it on call, it meant that we had to trade our youth and stamina in order to acquire the

knowledge. Another interesting observation was the transition from public sector to private practice and the huge leap of faith as one took the step to becoming an entrepreneur. I personally recall my sleepless nights prior to leaving for private practice, wondering whether I was doing the right thing.

In the final analysis, what really matters is that doctors will complain about everything except for one thing and that is job satisfaction. All of us receive so much goodwill from our patients and that is really the fuel that keeps us going. I do not believe that lawyers, accountants or other professionals receive the same amount of goodwill that we do from our patients. For that I am most grateful to be in this profession and will not change this for any other. I daresay that I speak on behalf of all of my fellow colleagues on this matter. **SMA**



Dr Chong is the President of the 51st 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...