

CMEP Symposium at World Congress of Bioethics: Medical Therapeutics - Professionally Synergistic or Incompatible?

By Loy Mong Shi

The 10th World Congress of Bioethics was held at Suntec Singapore from 28 to 31 July 2010. As one of the supporting organisations, SMA hosted a symposium entitled “Medical Therapeutics and Aesthetics – Professionally Synergistic or Incompatible?” on 31 July 2010. The symposium was chaired by Dr Lee Pheng Soon and the speakers were Prof Bernard Lo and Dr T Thirumoorthy.

Conceived by SMA’s Centre for Medical Ethics & Professionalism (CMEP), the symposium attempted to address issues such as whether GP aesthetic practice, given its different business and practice model, should be segregated in its professional and regulatory framework from therapeutic medicine, and if such separation is a win-win situation for all. But on the other hand, if aesthetic practice were to remain as part of the medical profession, what accreditation or regulatory framework are necessary to ensure professionalism and patient safety?

The symposium commenced with Dr Lee Pheng Soon introducing the topic. This was followed by a talk presented by Prof Bernard Lo who gave an American account of aesthetic practice and his evaluation of its impact on the medical profession in US as a whole. He started off by raising some provocative questions. He challenged the audience by asking them if they agreed that therapeutic physicians and aesthetic practitioners should all be subjected to a common framework of licensing, certification for special

procedures, continuing medical education and informed consent. Thereafter, he went on to discuss the tension and overlap between professionalism and business, and the specific characteristics of the medical profession. Prof Lo ended his talk by giving two important take-home messages to his audience. Firstly he felt that some criticisms of aesthetic medicine also applied to therapeutic medicine and secondly, standards of professionalism should be followed by all practitioners of medicine.

The second speaker, Dr T Thirumoorthy, gave a professional ethics perspective which he started by examining the goals of medicine. The discussion focused on whether the business models and practices of aesthetic practice were in conflict with the professional framework intended for a therapeutic practice aimed at the restoration of the ill, rather than enhancement of the healthy. Dr Thirumoorthy first shared the statistics which showed that aesthetic practice has become an international phenomenon of colossal proportions and then moved on to touch on ethical issues in aesthetic practice.

The key to ethical difficulties in aesthetic practice, Dr Thirumoorthy felt, lies in the gap in perspectives between patient/public and physicians. The patient/public prefers the licensed doctor to perform the aesthetic procedures (rather than leave it to an untrained beautician) because of the trust and confidence in the vigorous training and credentialing system in medicine, and

that the doctor will always act in the patient’s best interest. Doctors, on the other hand, may opt to perform aesthetic procedures due to the more attractive financial rewards. Dr Thirumoorthy also talked about the differences between business and professional models in medicine. But regardless of the differences, it is important for doctors to take note that social responsibility, competence, ethical pricing of services and products, quality of relationship, integrity, transparency, trust and confidence are essential elements of professionalism. Dr Thirumoorthy finished by leaving some questions for the audience to ponder: “Will professional guidance and leadership pull aesthetic medicine to the traditional professional ethics and science?” and “Will the business, ethics and science of aesthetic medicine be the standard of therapeutic medical practice of the future?”

The floor was then opened to the audience whose questions were addressed by the panel.

CMEP wishes to thank Prof Bernard Lo, Dr T Thirumoorthy and Dr Lee Pheng Soon for sharing their thought-provoking perspectives at the symposium. CMEP hopes that this session is only the beginning of a meaningful and constructive journey to resolve the differences between traditional therapeutic medicine and aesthetic practice. CMEP will be soliciting a broader representation of views before putting up a position statement for reflective discussion among relevant stakeholders.

SMA



(1) Prof Bernard Lo (Professor of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco), Dr Lee Pheng Soon (Past President, Singapore Medical Association) and Dr T Thirumoorthy (Associate Professor, Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, Singapore) in a panel discussion

(2) A participant raising questions to the panel