



# The Politics of

# Envy

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

I never quite understood the role of Envy in the seven deadly sins. To refresh the memory, the list comprises of Wrath, Greed, Sloth, Pride, Lust, Envy and Gluttony. My first brush with the list was in mission school, in the chapel where these sins were drummed into our heads by rote and memory.

It was not till I had a conversation with a friend who had done very well for himself that I understood the role of Envy in the legion of vices. He had become quite a catch for a swarm of private bankers hoping to get his business. Having quite a bit of ammunition, he had an appetite for trading huge chunks of shares and taking positions in various blue chip companies on most of the global stock exchanges. His lifestyle was also quite surreal; there were the fast cars, exotic trips, casinos, top of the line hotels and private jets. I would try to restrict myself to having coffee with him at Killiney, Ya Kun or at most, Starbucks.

His lifestyle was intoxicating and I felt that I could not stay in that sort of environment for too long. It was heady and yet at the same time very toxic for normal working folk like us. As doctors, I would always liken us to farmers; we tend to our "crop" of patients lovingly and take good care of them. Over time we would then harvest

the fruits of our labour. As such, the world of investment bankers, mergers and acquisitions where everything is pegged at a percentage of the transaction would be pretty alien to us. After all we cannot charge our patients a fee commensurate with a fraction of their net worth; though I must say with regret that a minority of doctors amongst us do try to do so.

With the frame of mind of a farmer, hanging out too much with this friend of mine was a natural non-starter. He told me that a few young and impressionable bankers who hung out with him over time became intoxicated with the lifestyle. They became heavily in debt from the acquisition of fast cars, drinking heavily in clubs, gambling, and clothing themselves and their newfound girlfriends with luxury goods. In time, a couple of them ended up embezzling money and subsequently went to jail. It was after hearing the story that I understood the role of Envy. The young bankers had looked at my friend who had received very little education, decided that they were better educated and smarter than he was but they could not handle the fact that he was the one who had it all. They resented that he had the entire world at his feet and felt that he was not deserving of the pole position. Hence they had a desire, as Dante put it, "to deprive other men of

theirs". Of course Envy can also relate to other attributes, be it looks, talent, intelligence, status, prowess and so on.

Amongst our community and especially in private practice, we also tend to keep track of how our colleagues are doing. We are also guilty of Envy. I know of some who scour the operating theatre lists to see how the competition is faring in terms of numbers of patients listed for elective surgery. They are those who are on the lookout for their colleague's new acquisitions; be it a new car, a fancy watch or even a painting. I have also seen doctors browsing in shop windows and upon being spotted by their colleagues, beat a hasty retreat as invariably someone would snipe and say, "You should buy that, you can well afford it!" My patients who have been in the luxury watch and jewellery trade for decades have backed up all these observations. To me this is Envy at its worst. Do not forget that from these feelings of Envy, other greater manipulations or base intentions can arise and often do. Even in the public sector, we have those who are envious of titles, number of private patients and various hierarchies of professorships. I would digress here and tell you of an interesting word, *schadenfreude*. This word means a secret desire to see your friend

fail in German. *Schadenfreude* may well be a counterpart of Envy.

I would put it very philosophically; if your colleague or friend is doing well, please congratulate him and wish him well. Then follow up with a reminder to him to do something for society in the form of a donation, charitable act or social work instead of enriching some luxury car or goods manufacturer. In this instance, all your Envy will dissipate into thin air. That comes to the real crux of my column, that we have to think about the less fortunate amongst us as it approaches that festive time of the year.

Our association has long been supporting the needy medical students in the National University of Singapore. I was fortunate enough to be invited to a dinner in September where fifteen recipients of the SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund stood up and spoke about what the bursary meant to them.

Most of them came from appalling household situations, where the family income was of the order of a thousand to two thousand dollars monthly. The occupation of their parents included taxi drivers, machine operators, security guards, clerks and quite a few of the households had unemployed, invalid or single parents. The common thread amongst all the

medical students was their reliance on giving tuition to support not only themselves, but very often their entire families or younger siblings who were still studying. One girl gave tuition ten times weekly to make ends meet.

With the bursary, they all expressed a unifying thread, and that was the certainty that there was money in the bank account every month. The money, though modest, allowed them to stop or reduce their tuition load to concentrate on their studies, clinical work in the wards, resume sports to improve their health and spend precious time with their families. I only wished that I could have brought all who have contributed to the students' fund in the past and present to that dinner.

After all, Envy is best combated with Charity and what more but to help those needy medical students who have against huge odds, made it to medical school. Surely we can help these young men and women who will one day be our colleagues, our comrade in arms and may well treat us in our old age. I will take the opportunity to wish all of you many happy returns and festive greetings of the season. May we always have a thought for those less fortunate than us.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

SMA



*Dr Chong is the President of the 51<sup>st</sup> 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...*



## SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund

There are a number of bursaries, financial assistance schemes and loans which can help pay for the NUS tuition fees, but what about basic living expenses for the poorer students? We know some of these students have managed by giving tuition – unfortunately, at the expense of their own studies.

The SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund is a long-term commitment by SMA and we will match dollar-to-dollar donations from SMA members and well-wishers, up to a maximum of \$20,000 a year. All donations collected will go directly to the students, and will not become part of an endowment fund. Monetary donations in any amount will also qualify for 250% tax exemption\* .

We urge SMA members to support this worthwhile endeavour – because medical students are already members of the medical profession and medical students are our future.

### HOW YOU CAN CONTRIBUTE

#### 1) MAKE A DONATION

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

#### 2) 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.*

*Payments can be made by cheque, credit card or GIRO. Cheques should be made payable to "National University of Singapore".*

*Please indicate on the back of the cheque that it is for the "SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund". You can also donate online at <http://www.giving.nus.edu.sg/sma>.*

\* (All contributions received before 31 December 2010 will attract a higher 250% tax deduction for the 2010 year of assessment.)