

“PLEASE DON’T GO” - KC AND THE SUNSHINE BAND

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

While enjoying an evening of Spanish tapas and sangria with friends at Don Quixote in Dempsey, my iPhone rang like it was in ventricular fibrillation. The *Iberico* ham flying into my mouth stopped in midflight – it was The Hobbit. The Hobbit expressed disappointment that I and the SMA News Editorial Board had decided not to publish its Thanksgiving offering. The normally warm and witty Hobbit snorted over the phone like a raging bull on Red Bull. I explained to this legendary fuzzy anti-hero that while the message of this article did ring out home truths, it had a too-hot serving of in-your-face chili padi emotion with excerpts that might appear like burning napalm (than burning bush), possibly resulting in flaming collateral damage and a bitter aftertaste. Well, that was our opinion anyway. I realise that The Hobbit and Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, have much in common. Both have a deep sense of justice, a keen sense of right from wrong and a wicked sense of humour. Julian Assange’s real father said of his son, “He always stood up for the underdog, he was always very angry about people ganging up on other people.” In the case of WikiLeaks – now the 500-pound gorilla in the world’s master bedroom – there is a thin line between revealing secrets of injustice, atrocities, the sexual habits of or which world leaders enjoy the company of Ukrainian nurses, political and foreign policy shenanigans and chess moves, and unduly exposing information that may

destabilise global orders, create unwanted tensions and increase dangers to persons and nations.

In the many years of being the SMA News Deep Throat, The Hobbit has raised issues most people would not bring up in the public space. Casting light into dark places and playing the little girl in The Emperor’s New Clothes, the Hobbit has been both a conscience and a gadfly of Singapore Medicine, a commentator and

like hags”. Some speculate that The Hobbit ironically, might actually be an insider, but one who has seen battle as a clinician. Others suspect that Julian Assange may be a Yankee plant, as the WikiLeaks saga shows American foreign policy to be more powerful including in soft power than many have believed. According to the respectable Pew Research Center survey, one in five Americans think President Obama is a cactus. WikiLeaks hasn’t confirmed his

botanical roots yet. It’s hard to know what’s real these days.

The Hobbit and I both agree that WikiLeaks must not expose medical records and patient confidentiality, as this would erode the sacred trust built between doctors and patients. The Hippocratic Oath reminds all doctors of this responsibility to keep mum on medical information about their patients. Can

you imagine a Wee-ki-Leaks where everyone can get access to which rich, famous and powerful persons have urinary incontinence, discharging wounds or colostomy bags? How would it make the world a better place that an eminent member of society has paid for Botox and face lift for a lady friend (read my lips: not wife) or that a captain of industry is contemplating a sex change? In an era where electronic medical records are going to be even more pervasive, there must be a rock solid system to ensure that privacy of patient information does not leak out. It must not be that easy for a hospital attendant to walk



The SMA News Editorial Board wishes one and all a Happy New Year from Don Quixote in Dempsey

occasional pain in the gluteus maximus of The Establishment. And there is that exceptional Hobbit humour. Still, The Hobbit will be the first to admit that healthcare policy-making in Singapore has become far more dynamic, incisive and transparent than 20 years ago. But neither policy-makers nor institutions have a monopoly on what is right and correct, even though our reputable policywonks do spend huge amounts of brow beating time thinking through and executing policies. Here is where The Hobbit feels it needs to speak from the trenches, for those “bent double, like old beggars under sacks, knock-kneed, coughing

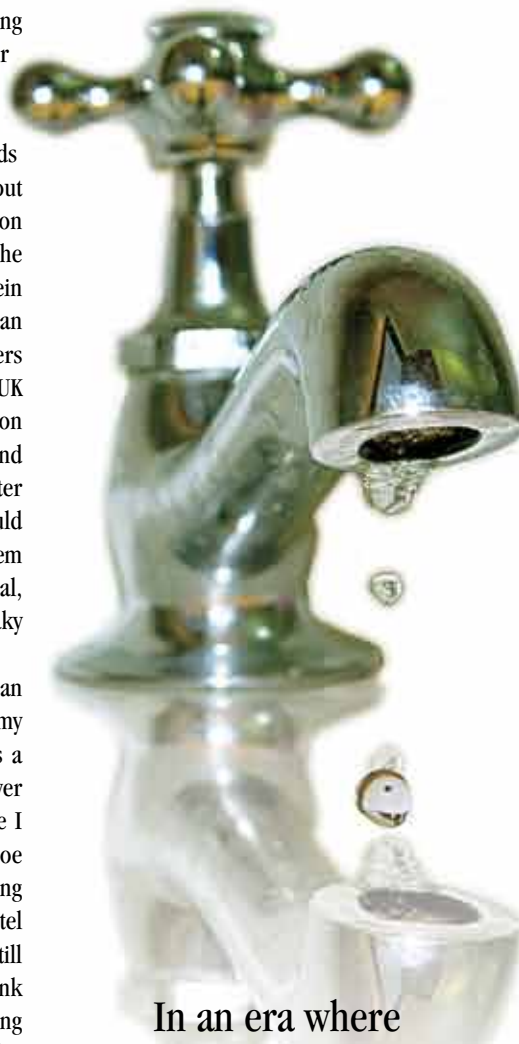
into a hospital and download on his “Lady Gaga CD” 250,000 patients worth of medical records. In this modern time of Personalised Medicine when patient information can be useful to private companies who seek out genetic profiles to tailor their drugs against or test their gene test kits, the challenge to protect such patient biodata must all the more be heightened. I am not a big fan of sub-optimal, non-ergonomic IT with clunky systems development. A lot of IT still suffers from little real effort to truly understand how doctors work in the complex interactive medical culture, and has insufficient focus on change management culture. I was watching “Walking with Dinosaurs” at the Indoor Stadium recently and thought it could be a show about the likes of myself and techno-dinos walking through the wards griping about IT malfunction. It turns out I am not alone. A 2009 Harvard study on 4000 American hospitals published in the *American Journal of Medicine* (Himmelstein DU et al) reports that the most wired American hospitals performed no better than others on quality or administrative costs. The UK National Health Service’s massive S\$20 billion IT centralisation plan was just withdrawn, and has been described as “the greatest IT disaster in history”. This does not mean we should abandon IT, but that with every failed system must come a more streamlined, functional, user-adored, error-minimal and non-leaky one that would lead to transformational IT.

As a young student in the 80s, I spent an economical Christmas at Caltech where my older brother was an undergrad. This was a special Christmas. It was the first time I ever tasted Haagen Daz ice cream, the first time I learnt (painfully) to downhill ski at Lake Tahoe and the first time I visited Disneyland. During this vacation, I slept on a sofa in his hostel library, where there were techies studying till dawn, screams piercing the silent night, Pink Floyd, John Lennon and Grateful Dead playing loudly from various dorm rooms and a 24/7 librarian lending out Physics and computer books, Arthur C Clarke and adult magazines. Here was a campus where Nobel Prize winners Richard Feynman would play bongo drums in the cafe and Linus Pauling would lead anti-war marches.

I remember the Caltech motto well; “The truth shall make you free”.

American media expounds to uphold the values of freedom, objectivity and democracy,

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but it does fall short, as revealed in Noam Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent* and the accusations that Fox News is a lackey for the Necons. America nonetheless is a great nation for its libertarian spirit, the principles of its founding forefathers and scientific enlightenment, creative destruction and disruptive innovation that no nation has yet managed to embrace as monumentally. Before WikiLeaks and The Hobbit, there was Daniel Ellsberg, the Harvard wunderkind, who in 1971 massively leaked out the top secret Pentagon Papers to *The New York Times* and other major United States media. The highly publicised Pentagon Papers revealed that unconstitutional actions had occurred at the highest level of the United States Office and that the Johnson Administration had consistently lied to Congress and the American people about the Vietnam War. The Hobbit has made us all “Think Different”, to use the Apple motto, made us laugh more and create a critical tension vital to any modern democracy. In this December issue of the SMA News, The Hobbit has declared that this would be its last article in the foreseeable future. This is sad news, like the final TV series episode of M*A*S*H, which saw depression levels and medical certificates soar worldwide the day after. We hope this Hobbit burnout is temporary and not the beginning of its extinction. It might well be stoked by the disagreement the SMA News Editorial Board had with The Hobbit on the Thanksgiving article, but I don’t believe it is the tipping point. Over the years, we have had some scuffles, resulting in robust debate, my ECG going into ST elevation, having to put on a proverbial Hurt Locker bomb disposal suit, and also the need for some SMA lawyers to sniff out ticking time bombs. Overall we have published most of The Hobbit’s articles, even if it sometimes meant my neck being on the DMZ line. Maybe it’s the stress of consistently churning out a monthly column, or the strain of a demanding primary healthcare practice that has compelled The Hobbit to go into hibernation. Therefore, we are asking for the readership to write in and send any messages and dedications to The Hobbit to come out of its hole, at news@sma.org.sg

The Truth shall make us free. We must finally wish for peace on Earth and goodwill to all men.

Happy New Year! **SMA**