

Close of the Year

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

It's that time of the year when I have to sit down and reflect in a quiet space on what went on during the past months. It seems that the year went by so quickly that I could hardly catch my breath. I find the speed just absolutely breathtaking. I attribute all this to the electronic media and devices we have around us, from Email, SMS and the Internet to iPads, notebooks and Blackberries. All these activities take away snippets of time that gradually morph from seconds into hours and before you know it, the day is done.

I started 2010 quite tired out from the hectic pace of 2009. That was the year of the pandemic and also issues like residency and the Medical Registration Act. This year has been quieter on the western front but some issues are still simmering below the surface. We have the aftermath of the financial crisis, with loss of confidence in the major paper currencies of the world because of indiscriminate printing. All the hot money thus flowed into Asian nations that still had assets backing their paper. The foreign money was not here to buy property but to seek refuge in a safe parking lot.

As a side effect of this phenomena, our medical units situation has gone into bubble territory. I am especially concerned about the new entrants into private practice and how they will fare under such rental or cost pressures. Will they cave in under the pressure resulting in erosion of ethics in their practice? That is a tough question on my mind and these days when I refer my patients, I also have to think about the cost structure of the private sector specialist I am referring to. For example, did he purchase his unit a long time ago and therefore it's all paid up? It's quite sad when these factors become a consideration for your patient's well being. All this frothy pricing has certainly not been helped by the 1.25 billion dollar bid for the Novena site. In a sense the bidders got away with it, with a sale of the listed company to foreign buyers. What's left behind will be for the current shareholder and future

patients to bear. I personally know quite a few doctors who bought a unit in Novena; they did so because they did not own a unit in Mount Elizabeth or Gleneagles and needed to hedge their position for the future rental increases.

Along with the rising costs, I have also heard from a major offshore insurance player that our surgical fees have been rising in the private sector for quite some time now. They have said that some of our doctors are charging rates similar to those in Hong Kong. I am hopeful that these are in the minority but I have asked for data on their annual insurance premiums from 2007, when the Guideline on Fees was lifted.

It will be interesting to see whether there is an increase in premiums over the years and if so, the resultant fee increases may lead to greater expectations of patients. In not so favorable outcomes, this leads to unhappiness and sometimes even to litigious matters. The goodwill of the profession may be eroded and the situation may well end up where Medicine is trade and not a profession.

The other issue is that of the residency programme; it has been tough on the doctors who are supervising the residents. They have to spend more time supervising and yet their income depends on their clinical workload. I hope that this ratcheting up of tension between supervision and clinical output will not be a driving factor in some of the 68 doctors' decision to leave for private practice. On the other hand, Medicine in Singapore has always been egalitarian and having protected time for residents does go against our grain. The residents who have protected time will see that their workload is passed to someone else. This really creates quite a bit of discomfort for most of us in a philosophical manner, and also for the residents themselves.

At the end of the day, these issues reflect complex underlying scenarios, and the solutions to these are also complex. There is no panacea or magic bullet. Solutions can be

brutal or elegant. Some solutions sacrifice the long term for short term gains and vice versa. Sometimes solutions if poorly crafted, despite good intentions, may generate more problems. I do not pretend that I have the answers to such complex scenarios but it is important to seek the truth and engage all parties to sit down and crack our heads together to find some way out.

As for the close of the old year and the beginning of the new, I am glad that we are all surrounded by family, friends and colleagues as we celebrate the festivities. Despite difficulties, we should all remember that at the end of the day, we are existing and working for these close relationships that are in part blood ties, emotional ties and the good working friendships that are forged through difficult times in the professional arena.

Finally, I take the opportunity to wish all our members well, and hope that all of us find happiness in the new year. **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...