



Nature of the Beast

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

I watched with amazement the events which unfolded during the past few days. First there was the bickering over the extension of the debt ceiling between the US Congress, the Senate and the White House. Then there was the massive drop in Dow Jones Index, followed by the Standard and Poor's downgrade of the US sovereign triple-A rating. The last was an event that was unprecedented since 1917.

What does all this mean for us? We will definitely feel the impact as the US and European economies start to slow down. We may be better insulated than most countries as we are four hours away by flight from the regional juggernauts China and India, and one hour away by flight from Indonesia.

What was more interesting was to see the reaction of human beings with regard to fear and greed. The markets were clearly spooked and I swear that the traffic on the roads was actually lighter in recent weeks. At home, we saw the clampdown in the housing market finally take effect, manufacturing slowing down because of the Fukushima nuclear plant incident, China attempting a soft landing of its overheated economy, and a general consensus that we were about to hit a rough patch.

I have always been amazed by how humans react to these primeval forces. Essentially our nature is beastly, and education with civilisation are barriers that keep the beast at bay and all caged up. The concept of university education was crafted to make us civilised men and to put some distance between the beasts and us.

In Singapore, the Asian culture tries to make one's selfish nature subservient to the greater good of family, community and society. Nevertheless, lots of beastliness still appear in our daily lives. As doctors, we watch our patients reveal their true natures in the privacy of the consultation room. We hear them talk darkly of their office colleagues who are backstabbing them, and how they are also plotting to return the favour in turn. We hear the convoluted family politics that go on, especially when large sums of money or expensive properties are involved. There are also relationships that are mercenary, be they between husband and wife, parent and child, or brother and sister. Very often we become immune to the shocking nature of such revelations – as an older colleague of mine reminded me, “Nothing shocks us anymore.”

We are often a neutral party in all these matters; we offer a listening ear and then try to suggest some solutions to the problem at hand. But what if the problem arises between doctor and patient? My patient came in the other day and was irate about a specialist that he had seen recently. The specialist wanted him to do a diagnostic procedure that was costly and he was sceptical about the specialist's intentions. He told me that he had not minced his words with the specialist, and had accused him of being more interested in the bottom line than the patient's best interests.

I took some time to calm him down and tried to explain the difficulties of a “false positive” test and that we needed to do more tests to prove that it was a false positive. Unfortunately these tests are invariably more expensive, more invasive and carry more risks as we try to narrow the gap between the false positive test and the gold standard. In the end, as he calmed down, he made a very good point, which was: because of the pressures that doctors face in terms of land costs and asset values, it is hard to keep their ethical stances and professionalism insulated entirely in watertight compartments from the demands of costs. He reiterated that because of the difficulty of maintaining ethical stances, he had ended up with second and third opinions. In short he had to pay two extra units of Gross Domestic Product to ensure that he got an honest, unbiased opinion that was free of moral hazards. He was not sure whether it was intentional on the part of the doctors, but opined that it added to higher healthcare costs as a whole. In short, he likened the situation to traders who had sought to churn commissions.

I was quite taken aback by this particularly frank, cynical and yet intelligent patient. I wondered what I could do to restore his faith in doctors, and also began to think about the others like him, who had the

same jaundiced view of our profession. We have to make sure that our ethical stances are not compromised, and that will in the turn generate the goodwill that we all want.

Other beastly interruptions were in the form of court cases reported in the papers. In the last few weeks, I have read with dismay of a doctor's wife suing another doctor, and a doctor's children, who are doctors themselves, going to court with their father's second wife over an expensive property. I could not, in all honesty, understand the intentions of the parties involved, but I was reminded quite brutally how human nature could turn rather ugly and confrontational. The legal process, being inherently adversarial, lends itself to amplify the worst of human nature.

In a sense I understood why Western civilisation places so much emphasis on decorum such as greeting each other and even perfect strangers; holding the door open for women and parties who have their hands full; not talking about salaries, cost of housing and all matters of monies. There were also the etiquette and manners demanded by society, which all have the intention of distancing the civil man from the beast in him. In Asian cultures, you also have respect for the elderly, nonconfrontational imperatives, and the virtues of bearing pain and suffering in silence.

In the final analysis, we are living in an urbanised complex society that is beset by expensive infrastructure, land and asset values. We all want the best for our families and ourselves. We aspire to the better things in life, and very often, these are dictated by society and its superficial trappings. We should focus on what is truly important like our health, our children's upbringing, our states of mind and doing our jobs well. Only then can we resist the insidious nature of fear, greed and envy; maintain our ethical stances on their finely balanced perches, and instead of following our own vested interests, do our utmost for the patient's best interests. Hopefully we can elevate ourselves to a better and more meaningful place, both in mind and spirit. **SMA**



Dr Chong is the President of the 52nd 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...