

# Do Doctors Make Good Managers?

By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

*This slightly tongue-in-cheek commentary is dedicated to all the doctors considering or making the leap of faith into the world of management.*

A medical student considering a career in business asked me recently, “Do doctors make good managers?” A very interesting question, which the conventional wisdom (and vested interests of administrators) would answer: “Of course not. Doctors only learn about Medicine; what do they know about management, money or business?” Actually, with the sobering wisdom of time and experience, I would retort that doctors actually have the training and hence potential to be excellent managers and business people. Let me explain.

Three critical management skills are strategy formulation, implementation and judgement, or being able to separate the wheat from the chaff. For all three, Medicine provides much training, albeit in an analogous fashion, but doctors can recognise the parallels and make the transition.

**Strategy formulation** is very similar to reaching a diagnosis. In both, all the necessary information is elicited through thoughtful and meticulous interrogation of the facts and provisional diagnoses or in business-speak, “strategic options”, are distilled. The routine of history and physical examination which we grill into our students and force almost ad nauseam repetition encourages doctors to be systematic and follow a comprehensive, rigorous checklist to ensure nothing is left out. In fact, the

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MECE (Mutually Exclusive, Collectively Comprehensive) approach, one of management consulting firm McKinsey & Company’s key organisational frameworks, is conceptually very similar to how we teach our students to think about differential diagnoses.

**Implementation or project management** is the equivalent of managing the patient’s disease through the course of hospitalisation or care, involving mobilising the myriad resources needed, as well as persuading the various parties including the patient, relatives and colleagues of the therapeutic options to adopt. This is no simple matter and all of us will remember fondly the house officer who always managed to get the consent form signed in a timely manner, the CT scan organised on the same day and the often-hostile internist to take over care of the diabetic patient after the foot ulcer had been debrided. Conversely, the “houseman from hell” still gives us nightmares: the many times patients were referred to the wrong specialist, a simple updating to relatives escalating into a complaint and need for a family conference...

“Effectiveness” surprisingly carries well across sectors and doctors outstanding in organising care for their patients very often turn out to be similarly outstanding in business execution.

**Evidence-based management** is the new buzzword amongst business gurus. For all the scorn poured upon doctors by managers who see physicians as mere technicians, there are some sane voices, and one of them is Prof Jeffrey Pfeffer from Stanford University. In an article for the *Harvard Business Review* exhorting managers to pay more attention to facts, or the evidence, he caustically remarked, “If doctors practiced medicine the way most companies practiced management, there would be more unnecessarily sick or dead patients and many more doctors in jail or suffering other penalties for malpractice.” Today’s doctors are well-versed in evidence-based medicine, and the ability to pore through the literature and recognise which theories and practices are sound and which are complete hogwash is an essential one for doctors, and also for managers



who have to wade through the cacophony of modern management fads.

Finally, and this is a double-edged sword, doctors are generally guided by a clear moral compass and deeply immersed in an ethos that places patients (or customers) before self. This is wonderful if the business is one that creates societal value and makes the world a better place while offering shareholders a decent profit. However, if the business is of dubious societal value and the “only” way to make money is through exploitation of customers, “well caught” (since values are caught and not actually taught) doctors may actually be a liability. **SMA**



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