

SMA NEWS



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**SMA
Lecture
2011**

Medicine and the Next ICE Age

By Denise Yuen

The SMA Lecture was instituted in 1963 and its themes are centred on medical ethics and related topics. SMA Lecturers are appointed by invitation from the SMA Council, and the lectureship is awarded in the main to eminent and distinguished persons who have made significant contributions to Medicine and the community.

This year's SMA Lecture, Medicine and the Next ICE Age, was held on 5 November 2011 at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital Auditorium. It was delivered by Dr Tan Lai Yong, who spent 15 years training village doctors in Yunnan, China, and returned to Singapore only in 2010. His citation was delivered by Dr Lee Ee Lian, Director of Medical Manpower, Singhealth, who has been friends with Dr Tan since their days in medical school (see pages 8 and 9).

Dr Tan Lai Yong promised, in an earlier interview, that this SMA Lecture "would be the most non-academic lecture ever". He did not disappoint, as he peppered a meaningful speech with humorous anecdotes. He began his lecture opining that Medicine is very complex, but added that he would like to share with the audience some things about integrity, compassion, encouragement and engagement.

Integrity

Dr Tan noted that doctors have ethical guidelines to adhere to in the practice of Medicine, but integrity is fundamental in a doctor-patient relationship and cannot be reduced to mere words. It is important to stand as doctors with roots and say that the value of integrity is important and keep it alive.

Dr Tan advised the younger doctors that when they receive criticism from senior and better-trained doctors, they should consider their words "faithful wounds" and not think that "these senior people are guarding their territory".

He noted that healthcare depends on the support of allied healthcare professionals. Doctors, he said, can learn from nurses and other allied health professionals. For example, they can see doctors' ethical behaviour from a different perspective, and help doctors to learn and grow in integrity. Health professionals can also help doctors improve health education.

As a malnourished Primary 1 student in Mountbatten English School, the doctor told my mother, "Your boy is too skinny, must eat more liver and proteins." My mother only speaks Cantonese, and I was the youngest of seven children living in a one room apartment. She nodded her head, "Yes,

doctor, yes." She walked out and told the nurse, "Who don't know milk and proteins is good? Where to find milk and proteins?" Then the nurse turned around and asked my mother, "Do you boil soup with ikan bilis?" My mother said, "Yes." "Ikan bilis, give your son to eat." My mother said, "This one I can do."

– Dr Tan Lai Yong

Dr Tan also recounted the help he received from nurses and others during his time in China, and proceeded to show the audience two videos. The first video depicted a special game, which his nurses and some medical students came up with to train the village doctors in DOTS therapy. The nurses and medical students then went a bit further, and the second video showed how they taught the village doctors tuberculosis control using songs that they had written. As the village doctors were largely illiterate, they learnt via such games and songs.

I didn't understand that if you wanted something to be on TV, you had to pay a small fee, and I didn't want to pay any fee. I also wasn't interested in getting what I was doing on TV. But I realised many of the village doctors had a VCD player at home. They were illiterate. So I got the TV station to come, and asked them, "Why don't you film all the songs that we sing and all the games that we play, cut it into a CD, and I'll buy the CD from you. That I can do."

They were very excited, because they were happy to earn clean money. For once, someone made them a deal. You cut me the CD, I will pay you, and in the end, the amount you earn is more than what people pay you in coffee money. And the amazing thing was, I didn't give out textbooks. The village doctors brought home the CDs and showed them to their whole village. And every village was listening to this chuan ran bing ge (infectious disease song).

– Dr Tan Lai Yong

He highlighted one issue of integrity that troubles us today, which is the income gap. One billion people in the world live on less than one US dollar a day, and two million children die of diarrhoea each year.

I used to do ORS, oral rehydration solution, to treat diarrhoea. It's very simple – some sugar, some salt, some



Dr Tan Lai Yong delivering the SMA Lecture

water. And we told the villagers, if you make it correctly, it tastes like a teardrop. I had doctors from Hong Kong, US and Singapore volunteering. And I also told them, you make it correctly, it tastes like a teardrop.

And there we see the income gap. When I tell the villagers it tasted like a teardrop, they always said, "Ah, I know!" The foreign doctors, when you tell them, they would ask me, "So what does it taste like?" The gap that divides us – we in the cities have either forgotten, or refuse to cry.

– Dr Tan Lai Yong

He also noted that Singapore's income gap is one of the greatest in the world. "So what do we do?" he asked. He felt that doctors should be the ones to inculcate and excavate compassion.

Compassion

In Dr Tan's experience, he found that there are many compassionate doctors and nurses amongst the local medical community. He pointed out that teams from Singapore General Hospital (SGH) have gone to Yunnan eight to ten times using their own money, and carried out hundreds of cleft palate operations. They have worked very well, and worked humbly alongside doctors and nurses from Kunming (the capital of Yunnan) and

did not lord over them. Teams from National University Hospital (NUH) also carried out cataract surgery. Private hospitals like Raffles Hospital have contributed as well.

There was this lady with a tumour on her head. She came from Yunnan to Singapore and went to Raffles Hospital. Her mother waited for me in the lobby downstairs and asked me, "When is the market day?" They have a market day once a week (in the village). She said, "My daughter is going for surgery and she needs some meat. I don't see any cows. Where are we going to buy meat?" I assured her that there would be meat.

At the pre-op meeting, Prof Walter Tan (Medical Director of Raffles Hospital) sent out signals, and 24 specialists gathered to offer their services, from radiologists to neurosurgeons. My friend from Yunnan was amazed. He said, "Which leader summoned them here?" I said, "No leader summoned them here. They sent out some emails asking for volunteers, described the case, and volunteers came." The surgery was done, and this lady went home very well.

– Dr Tan Lai Yong

Dr Tan then introduced Zhang Qing to the audience. She is from a village in Yunnan and was in Singapore for a medical check up. Speaking

in Mandarin, she told the audience about her story and how the medical community in Singapore had helped her. When she was 14 years old, she was making her way home one day, when a man suddenly appeared and poured acid on her face. As a result, she became blind, and her father had to go around borrowing money to pay for her medical treatment. Through a kind taxi driver, she met Jean Watson, an occupational therapist, who then arranged for her to meet doctors from NUH who were then in China. The doctors told her that her case was complicated, so she had to go to Singapore for treatment. After multiple operations at NUH and SGH, she finally regained her sight.

Dr Tan also appealed to Singaporean doctors to be especially compassionate to the migrant worker community within Singapore.

One day I bought some apples (in China). But the man shortchanged me. I went to him and said, "You are cheating me because I am a foreigner, right?" He said, "No no no, I cheat everybody!"

He said, "Boss, what is 20 cents to you?" The difference between \$5 and \$5.20 is nothing to you, but it feeds him.

People ask me, how did you stay in China for so long, when there is so much cheating? I come back to Singapore and say, maybe we do the same, but we legalise it. We have Bangladeshi workers who come here and we pay them a pittance, but it is legal. We employ people who come here and for the first eight months, their salary is given to some agent, but it is legal. We know that rest is good, but our country debates on whether to give our foreign workers a day of rest.

– Dr Tan Lai Yong

He declared there are definitely kind doctors in Singapore, and exhorted the audience to carry on this tradition of practising with compassion.

Encouragement and engagement

Dr Tan noted that there are now 3,000 foreign doctors registered in Singapore. He asserted that the strength of medical practice in Singapore – why they could send all those teams to Yunnan – was because local doctors went to the same medical school, knew their friends, and with one phone call, were able to connect with so many people. But the scenario is changing with more foreign-trained doctors coming to Singapore. Hence he felt that there is a need to find ways to get doctors together, so they can provide better services to patients. He said, "The old school ties method may not work so well. We have to invest in friendships. We have to welcome, take in, embrace, and share our values with graduates from the different medical schools."

He also cautioned that in Medicine there will be casualties, due to reasons such as misfortune, misguidance, misadventure, carelessness or pride. "How then do we rehabilitate doctors who have fallen into a rut?" he asked. He agreed that there should be punishment, just discipline and restitution, but hoped to see more rehabilitation for these doctors.

Then he turned the focus on medical students, whom he declared



Dr Tan (last row, far right) with 16 lecturers from Kunming Medical University who came specially to attend his lecture



Students from Project Lokun



Dr Tan (standing, second from left) with students from Project Phetchabun



Zhang Qing telling her story



The audience listening intently



SMA President Dr Chong Yeh Woei presenting Dr Tan with a token of appreciation

had “the ideals and the energy to excite us again”. He highlighted various volunteer projects that medical students from both the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSoM) and Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School are conducting in Singapore and overseas. Local volunteer projects include a hypertension project being carried out among low income groups in the Jurong area, and an anti-tobacco group lobbying for a tobacco-free Singapore. Overseas volunteer projects include Project Lokun (Cambodia) and Project Phetchabun (Thailand), which are run by students from YLLSoM.

Dr Tan informed the audience that some YLLSoM students from Project Lokun and Project Phetchabun had set up booths outside the auditorium, and encouraged the audience to visit the booths to take a look and learn more about the students’ causes.

He also encouraged doctors to help medical students who request their assistance for their volunteer projects.

Concluding thoughts

In winter, we climbed the mountains and planted walnut trees. I asked a farmer, “Why do you plant the trees in winter?” He said, “The tree is deep asleep.” It resonated with me. He said, “When the tree is deep asleep, when you plant it, you will not hurt it. In spring when the leaves begin to grow, when you plant it, you hurt the tree.” Logical. So we planted thousands of walnut trees in the mountains, as a way of income generation.

After planting the trees, the farmer said, “Now you must water the trees.” So we walked down the valley to carry water up. It was very heavy. One thing I never taught my children again is “Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water”. There is no water up the hill, you know! The water is in the valley.

So I dutifully carried two buckets of water, then I asked the farmer, “You told me the trees are sleeping and will not grow. Why do we have to water the trees?” These farmers are very modest. He hung his head and said, “Doctor, the tree is sleeping, the leaves are not growing, but the roots are growing! It’s just that you don’t see them.”

– Dr Tan Lai Yong

Dr Tan felt that while doctors should keep key performance indicators in mind, they also need to grow the roots of integrity and compassion, so that they can go out and encourage. He quoted the founder of Revlon, Charles Revson, who once said, “In the factory we make cosmetics, in the store we sell hope.” He said this quote got him thinking, “As doctors, how do we fill in the blanks? In our clinics, what do we do? That is the product. But to society, what do we offer?” He opined that if doctors hold fast to integrity and compassion, they will have great things to contribute to Singapore. With integrity and compassion, doctors can then go out and encourage and engage.

SMA President Dr Chong Yeh Woei then presented tokens of appreciation to both Dr Tan Lai Yong and Dr Lee Ee Lian, and the SMA Lecture closed to tremendous applause. **SMA**

Citation for Dr Tan Lai Yong

By Dr Lee Ee Lian



Dr Lee Ee Lian showing the audience a photo depicting Dr Tan Lai Yong in his "typical position"

My citation started off being serious, but when it comes to Lai Yong, it soon deteriorated into something more lighthearted and yet still loving. I have the singular blessing of being Lai Yong's classmate for five years, and there are quite a few of our classmates in the audience here today.

Some background about Lai Yong: he went to Temasek Junior College (TJC) and even back then as a JC student, his heart for helping those in trouble already showed itself. He spent most of his college years chasing delinquents, trying to get them back on the straight and narrow. Lai Yong got his MBBS from NUS, graduating in 1985. He received the Public Service Commission Merit Bursary Award and went on to get his Master of Christian Studies at Regent College, Vancouver

in 1995. Being the eternal student, he is now studying at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy on a scholarship.

This is one of the rare photos you have of Lai Yong as a medical student. They are rare not because there are few photos of Lai Yong – there are indeed many, but it is rare to have one of him looking formal. This is of his clinical group, some of whom are now dermatologists and radiologists, orthopaedic surgeons and prominent GPs.

While most of Lai Yong's time in medical school was spent attending classes and walking across from the College of Medicine Building to Singapore General Hospital to see patients, a significant portion of his time was also spent with the usual accomplices. They would go to Ah Leng's canteen for *makan*, skip lessons, go

to the beach and sleep through every Pathology lecture – and yet Lai Yong still managed to do very well during the final MBBS, better than everyone else who stayed awake!

I think when you do the Lord's work, He blesses you in other ways. The other way that Lai Yong is blessed is that he has not changed a single bit, unlike the rest of us who have significantly aged over the years! This is the typical position that Lai Yong can be found in during medical school, and this habit continues to present day.

After graduation and during national service, he was sent to Kanchanaburi most of the time. When he came back as a medical officer through MOPEX (Medical Officer Posting Exercise), he did volunteer work when the rest of us were scrambling to get into

prestigious positions for traineeships. Instead, Lai Yong volunteered to work in prison service where he contributed significantly towards the welfare of the incarcerated.

Here is another photo of more usual suspects trying very hard and in vain to light a fire. They are now GPs, radiologists, ENT surgeons, and endocrinologists. As Bertha (emcee Dr Bertha Woon) has mentioned, Lai Yong decided to make the ultimate sacrifice in terms of his career from 1996 onwards. While many of us pursued more glamorous forms of specialisation, Lai Yong packed his bags with his very young family and went to China, where the majority of his work has been done for the last 15 years. He only came back exactly a year ago.

He started in Xishuangbanna directing the village doctors' training programme, and was directly involved in the care of the villagers. Then he went on to be Director of Bless China

International and a lecturer at the School of Public Health at Kunming Medical University.

Lai Yong cared for villagers who lived in far-flung underprivileged and underserved areas. He was also directly involved in training barefoot doctors. That has really been the bulk of his work, and those of us who have read about him are not unfamiliar with this. He has won many awards not because he sought them, but he was sought out due to the nature of his work. He has won accolades along the way and I would like to mention that SMA is indeed very privileged because Lai Yong is in a suit today. The only other person he bothered to put a suit on for is President S R Nathan. He didn't even put it on for Premier Wen Jiabao!

Mao Zedong said that women hold up half the sky. In Lai Yong's case, his wife Lay Chin holds up half of the work that he does. Not only does she take care of the family and

support him, a lot of times, she is also directly involved in his work. For everything that he has achieved, it would not have been possible without her.

Other blessings in Lai Yong's life include his daughter Amber, who is in JC 1 this year. His son, Edward, is in Secondary 1. Here is one of the last pictures they took before they came back home from Yunnan. I leave you now with a quotation from Joseph John, one of the workers with the Varsity Christian Fellowship in medical school, where Lai Yong was one of the regular attendees. Joseph John gave me this quotation regarding Lai Yong when he was younger. It still applies not only to him, but also to every one of us here: 1 Timothy 4:12 – "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity."

And with that, I thank you for listening. **SMA**

Dr Tan (standing between the two women) as a medical student



Dr Tan (second from right) during his time in the army



The Tans bidding a fond farewell to Yunnan



Dr Lee (second from left) and Dr Tan (fifth from right) with friends at the SMA Lecture

