

# 2012

## ENTER THE DRAGON

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

### OH WOW. OH WOW. OH WOW.

2011 will be remembered for Steve Jobs, the walk-on-the-wild-side wild child of the 60s and 70s counterculture, who ran the most powerful company in the world until his death from cancer. Steve Wozniak, the tech brains behind Apple, insists that it is this counterculture spirit that has been the hard drive for Apple's and, he believes, any real innovation. Hard driving Jobs made information and interaction fun and fast, and his and other such-like inventions (although Malcolm Gladwell in the *New Yorker* calls Jobs more a tweaker than a true eureka innovator) will rev up healthcare's required rapid response time, zippy data flow to connect the docs faster than you can say Higgs boson. He was also the zen master of marketing, convincing us all to buy the first iPhone even with its notoriously low battery life. Still, Jobs' greatest legacy, like a cantankerous clinician-scientist, is in bringing the science to end-user application with consummate perfection. Sentimentality aside, the days of junior doctors ironing hospital case sheets to prepare for Prof Seah Cheng Siang's ward rounds and x-rays tucked under wrought iron hospital beds are over. These coming years, Singapore's biomedical enterprise will be aiming downstream towards more application, be it devices, drugs or diagnostics to impact directly on human diseases.

The famous competition between Apple and Microsoft exemplifies the illuminating energy, ego, freewheeling and wackiness of their visionaries. Together with the likes of Google, Amazon and Facebook, these global giants celebrate the best of competitive America. These gazillion dollar companies even message moral sentiments: Google's Don't Be Evil, Apple's Think Different, and Facebook's powerful role in the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movement. Think Adam Smith's invisible hand meets *Revenge of the Nerds* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Good lessons for Singapore

Medicine: simplify complexities in processes, drive discoveries to applications, adopt more than linear concrete cause-effect policy mindsets with more adaptive, intuitive and disruptive solutions to the many wicked problems in healthcare. Don't be evil. And first do no harm.

### Red bull

But now it appears that not all competition works. An economist friend related to me the example by *uber* economist Robert H Frank, in his seminal book *The Darwin Economy*, of bull elk which lock horns to fight over females (so what else is new). Thanks to this reproductive self interest, the bull elk antlers evolved over generations to become clumsily, bulkily huge, and has collectively weakened the entire elk species because of serious vulnerabilities against predators. There are parallel lessons in the tale of the two huge healthcare clusters, NHG and SingHealth, who have locked horns over talent, technology, patients and other KPIs, resulting in some collective action problems of dividing than uniting resources and strengths. It does not mean that we should regress to the collectivism of beating our chest and losing individualism for the glorious Motherland (think Stalinist North Korea). The market economy harnessing the power of libertarian self interest is still the best economic model (think South Korea). The shift in local healthcare planning is now towards regional clusters and academic medical centre ecosystems leveraging on the bunching up of primary, secondary and tertiary care. Like autonomous charter cities, one hopes this does not mean more silos and less harmonisation.

Over family meal debates, I favoured guidelines on fees whereas a younger sibling did not. Healthcare is a classic historical example of market failure, a hot pot bubbling with information asymmetry of medical magic and voodoo with all kinds of swirling spicy ingredients – including corporate



Bull elk locking horns over females

gamesmanship and soaring healthcare and operating costs – all reaching boiling point. In 2011, some local high profile cases of doctors in hot soup, deserving or not, have frayed public trust and eroded the reputation of Singapore Medicine. The Ministry of Health's publishing of bill sizes *has* lowered medical cost of procedures. Let's hope that while the revised SMC Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines straightens out the profession, it does not create an inflexible climate that will make practising Medicine too defensive and cloud the intuitive workflow and better judgement of doctors. Some warts notwithstanding, Singapore Medicine still enjoys a trusted name in high quality medical care in a solid operating system bound by rule of law.

### Mind the gap

Speaking of operating systems, 2011 was a dark tunnel for Singapore transportation. Transport overcrowding was a big General Election issue in the face of the amazingly ballooning Singapore population. *Lagi* worse, during December's frenzy of Christmas shoppers and heavy rains, the unthinkable happened. MRT trains broke down, causing choking traffic arterial embolism. How could this sort of thing happen in a city that Harvard economics super guru Ed Glaeser just called the most well managed in the world? Is it because the sights were set too much on profits over people and the public good? With wage gaps widening from Singapore to China to the United States, something not seen in decades, does everything need to be a cost centre in a "grow-at-all-cost" micro mindset? Is this a case of "heart" failure in the pursuit of hard cash? This black swan event angered Singaporeans. Many were further disgruntled when a public figure, in an oops moment, implicated workers in an MRT paralysis, just as similar early blame was levelled on junior doctors in a recent case of medical errors, when more systemic problems

needed to be investigated further first. More derailment of public trust. More lessons for Singapore Medicine.

Such chronic price deductions of basic-need services which ride on free market mechanisms, eats directly into a middle class fast sliding into the sandwich class, and slips further down to the minced meat class aka no bread *liao*. Can we not strengthen a broad net of public services and public goods not left to overenthusiastic market forces and leave free market activities to the passengers, enabling more entrepreneurial enterprise and creating real products and industries? Is it a self evident truth that public services run as private entities are inherently more efficient and productive? True, the *Gahmen* does deliver large servings of money targeted at needy at-risk groups. But in terms of building an inclusive overarching safety net for all, it lags behind developed, vibrant Asian capitalist countries like South Korea and Hong Kong. Such a gesture could further lessen the potential tensions between Singaporeans and new foreign immigrants and foreigners vying for the same jobs and resources in the little red dot.

Those with a Thatcherite phobia for nationalisation should look at Japan's privatised Tokyo Metro. Almost 50 year old, it serves as a shining example as the world's most efficient subway train system, with no breakdowns or accidents ever, as it transports 35 million people within the Tokyo megapolis. With subway lines as intricate as a bowl of ramen, operations as complex as ramen stock and private competition as robust as ramen shops in Tokyo, the Japanese show the world how to do it best. This is no two bull elk fighting for a gal's love.

### People power

2011 was a watershed General Election (GE). The people's voice was loud in the GE sound and fury, especially through



Japanese ramen

new media. Many doctors were prominently involved either as candidates or behind the scenes, including a breast cancer surgeon, an emergency physician, general practitioners, an infectious disease physician, ophthalmologists, an orthopaedic surgeon, a paediatric intensivist, and a psychiatrist. Doctors are naturally drawn to politics because of their passion to “cure the country” than for personal gain, one hopes. Dr Sun Yat Sen was deeply impressed by modern Hong Kong during his time as a medical student at Hong Kong University that he wished for his native Zhongshan, Guangzhou, to prosper likewise. Starting with only this modest ambition, he ended up transforming China as Father of the Nation.

Singapore’s empowered citizenry raised many concerns, but mostly bread and butter issues. Noise is good. We should not fear or discourage noise, even with some crap screeching amidst the thunderclap. Every doctor knows that it is the silent patient we should worry about and not the one crying out. And every senior doctor would want to be called earlier to monitor and intervene in problems than when the patient is lifeless with fixed and dilated pupils. So too any *gahmen* would want to hear the cries from the ground than rosy platitudes from loyal consorts. The common refrain from the Men in White is that Singapore’s 3M healthcare framework is the most efficient system in the world. The Opposition feels that the *Gahmen* is driving the Singapore healthcare vehicle too hard on half the petrol needed, and pressure points and tyre wear are emerging, especially with worrying shortages of hospital beds and doctors. Both are right depending on which angle of light you view it from.

### **Puff the Magic Dragon**

2012 will be about jobs. Job prospects are looking better

in the United States and more Americans are spending. But the American eagle still soars lower with osteoporotic wings. The European bear facing a ruptured financial aneurysm continues to bleed badly. The red dragon is Cushingoid with its property bubble looking hairier every day. Russia is on the brink of a second glasnost. Even in the dark night of the dollar, healthcare jobs are less fragile.

Looking on the bright side, many babies will be born in the Year of the Dragon. The O&G and paediatric folks will have their hands full. Not to mention, schools, tuition centres and toy shops. The *Gahmen* will be relieved that there will be more happy patter of little feet since Singapore has one of the lowest birth rates in the world.

*Science* journal’s “2011 Breakthrough of the Year” has nothing to do with discovering cosmic particles, exposing Justin Bieber as an alien from the planet Dork, announcing a blockbuster app like Angry Birds, describing a new gene for happiness, or unveiling a new colony of Hobbits in New Zealand. They chose to honour a landmark clinical study which proved that HIV-positive patients on antiretroviral agents could reduce sexual transmission rates to their partners by over 95%.

Early this morning before closing this editorial, I went cycling with two fellow doctors. As the sun broke beautifully across north Singapore with the Straits of Johor on our right and serene Kranji Reservoir on our left, I felt euphoria and exhilaration. And I don’t think they are growing *weed* around Neo Tiew. Bad news in Medicine sells newspapers. But the small and big joys, triumphs and miracles that happen in the healing profession every day will continue to bring us all euphoria and exhilaration, and put smiles on the faces of those whom we look after. **SMA**