



Dawn of a New Year

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

The end of the year has always been a festive season celebrated with lots of food, wine and company. As one year winds to an end, the next swiftly approaches. This year we will have the Lunar New Year quite early in January, so it will be a transition from the year end festivities to the Lunar New Year celebrations in a matter of weeks. For most of us it will be a struggle to keep our food intake down and keep the calories at bay, while trying to remain comfortable in our clothes.

There are many who are glad to be rid of 2011. The events that unfolded included natural disasters on a scale that we have never witnessed before. The earthquakes that rocked Japan triggering a tsunami whose natural powers of destruction were captured by helicopter news crew. These media videos and images have made us shudder with morbid fascination as we witness Nature at her cruellest. Yet other devastating earthquakes included the ones which occurred in New Zealand, Turkey and Myanmar. Floods have also devastated Queensland in Australia and closer to home, Thailand. Hurricanes and tornadoes have lashed the US while typhoons have affected the Pacific Rim nations. Even in Singapore, we have experienced nearly a month of continuous rainfall with flash floods and morning temperatures of 23°C. The Munich Reinsurance Company has estimated that this is the costliest year to date for natural disasters, with losses of about US\$310 billion in the first nine months of the year.

While there have been natural disasters, there have also been man made financial disasters in Europe and the US. The Eurozone has seen its years of gorging on cheap credit come back to roost. The US has started to see some glimmer of hope in the latest figures, but in reality, we will see a long protracted course of setbacks and false dawns over a decade or more.

Somewhat fortunately for Singapore, we are well placed with flight times of four to six hours away from the juggernauts of China and India, and

one hour away from the archipelago of Indonesia. With a bit of luck, these regional powerhouses will still be moving slowly but surely under their own steam. We can hope for some spillover benefit from these giant neighbours in the next decade or so.

So what can one do in the midst of all these uncertainties? As a community, we will face economic challenges like slower growth, price sensitive patients from the region, increasing costs pressures triggered by asset inflation, and for all those who run their own practices, it will be the year of shrinking margins.

In public service, the pressures are somewhat different. For the younger doctors, their concerns will be of undergoing training, and for senior staff, how to preserve their incomes as they have to put aside dedicated time to train their juniors. Other challenges would be to see how we, as a small nation, can bridge the private and public sector divide to help address the imbalances between the two sectors.

On a personal level, I guess we have to go back to the basics. I look to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of a New Year's resolution as an interesting start. Getting oneself motivated to do something positive for oneself is so difficult. Most of us are fairly motivated to get into medical school and to embark on a medical career. However, when it comes to personal development, I find that many are contented and to some extent, complacent. Just like continuous medical education, developing oneself is an ongoing project. Most motivation theories talk about filling a physiological need like feeding or resting. They also recognise the need for a person to attain a higher goal or state of mind like self respect, a sense of achievement and actualisation.

Motivation is also known to be internally driven or externally driven.

Internal drive is a highly prized characteristic in your children or your employees. Somehow these persons are very curious and interested in the world around them, and seem to be driven by this interest in mastering a subject, task

or job. They also seem to have a self belief in their ability to get their job done and behave somewhat as autonomous units with their own intrinsic energy sources. Some attribute this quality to genes, but I suspect it has to do with some form of complex neuronal wiring.

On the other hand, you have the externally driven crowd who does well under pressure from the stick or the carrot. Competition, whether healthy or not, is also lumped as part of the externally motivated crowd. We have always agonised over the education system with regard to unhealthy competition among our children. Somehow the incentives to do well can sometimes lead to a rather unsatisfactory state of selfishness, self interest, aggression and other perverse traits. When incentives are absent, some can quickly lose interest in their subjects or tasks. For those who have fallen by the wayside, they can be left with feelings of inadequacy, low self esteem and have vestiges of damage that they carry for the rest of their lives.

For most of us, moving towards this goal of self development need not be winning the Nobel Prize or becoming obscenely wealthy. It can be fairly simple in changing aspects of your comfortable lives that will result in a better quality of life and a better state of zen in your mind. One can start with physical tasks like eating less and eating healthier foods. Losing weight, picking up exercise and doing more brisk walking in our beautiful connected parks and gardens are also good goals. Taking up social sports, dancing, yoga or Pilates can also be very enriching. Reducing your alcohol intake or the number of cigarettes you smoke may also be helpful. Remember that most of these are targeted at ensuring that the second half of your life is in a better quality and shape. Avoiding mortality and morbidity is a powerful motivation as we all know how much trouble our bodies can run into. The other aspect of motivation is also known as volition. This is where you have the thought process of motivation, get off your posterior and actually start moving

towards that goal.

Yet other simple self development goals can be to look at the way we drive, how we conduct ourselves in front of patients, junior staff and nurses. Disruptive behaviours like abuse and rage, with flying instruments in the operating theatre while under stress are just not on. For junior staff, cooperating with your fellow colleagues, pulling your weight and extending basic courtesies to those around you in the allied health professions are a good way to enhance your fledgling career. For those who are in private practice, charging way above norms does not seem like a good long term strategy. Conducting business in your personal capacity or as part of a business organisation in an honourable manner with good considerations of other parties is really a win-win situation and builds your reputation to a large extent.

I have said what I have needed to say about motivation, and hope that I have given you all some food for thought as we head into a somewhat uncertain 2012. We have to concentrate on the basics and what better way to start than changing some aspect of our own selves to make life better for all those we love, our patients who give us the purpose and goodwill, and those we value as colleagues, both junior and senior.

I take this opportune moment to wish you all a most wondrous and Happy New Year, with good wishes to all in your endeavours big and small. **SMA**



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