

SINGAPORE MEDICAL COUNCIL

Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony

Speech by Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Health



*I*t gives me great pleasure to be here with you for the Singapore Medical Council Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony. Congratulations to all the newly registered doctors, and my heartfelt thanks to all of you for being at the frontline battling the COVID-19 pandemic.

In our highly globalised world, no country can be an impenetrable fortress. Even if the borders were closed to travellers - ideas, information and diseases can easily transcend borders. Our doctors work in these challenging times when novel communicable diseases can emerge regularly, with rapid spread and an evolving, unique disease pattern.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first broke out early last year, the medical and scientific community around the world responded quickly. The virus' genome was mapped, the PCR test was developed, and a vaccine invented and approved in record time, leveraging technological progress that was decades in the making. There is perhaps no time in the history of medicine where so much research and medical advancement was done over such a short period of time.

This is only made possible with the resilience and dedication of the medical community. As we prepare for our transition to COVID resilience, Singaporeans take comfort that we have ready expertise in our national healthcare system and the capabilities to respond quickly to treat the sick, and to attenuate the spread of infection.

Today's pledge-taking is your commitment to the lifelong journey of saving and improving lives. And this is possible only if you build trust with your patients - the cornerstone of every doctor-patient relationship. The relationship of trust was put to the test as we rolled out our COVID-19 national vaccination programme. As it turned out, our people heeded the advice of the Government and the medical profession, leading to Singapore having one of the highest vaccination rates in the world.

But relationships are changing because of technology. Every one of us are staying in touch with many more acquaintances through messaging services. Family members can sit at the same dinner table but each engrossed in their own devices. Customers have infinite amount of information at their fingertips and will compare and plough through recommendations before buying a book or a toaster.

And if you are in a position of authority, be it a public servant or a doctor, the person you serve will question or even challenge your solutions or treatment. It is a good thing when patients become more knowledgeable, and more involved in co-creating treatments and solutions. But at the same time, information technology also helped proliferate misinformation, and the drip effect of daily doubts that come through our devices will erode trust over time.



A doctor from the CGH team performs a swab on a nursing home staff
Source: Changi General Hospital (CGH)

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CGH doctor attends to a patient
Source: CGH

Today's pledge-taking is your commitment to the lifelong journey of saving and improving lives. And this is possible only if you build trust with your patients – the cornerstone of every doctor-patient relationship.

The medical profession must continue to work harder to preserve and strengthen the trust between doctors and patients, by demonstrating morality and integrity, guaranteeing professional competency, and showing commitment to selfless service.

The foundation of healthcare is ethical and professional practice. As doctors, you must continue to uphold your personal ethos and maintain high personal practices of care. You must also continually put in effort to assure good standards by building your skills and competencies. Involve yourself in research and education and keep on learning.

Misconduct in any profession is inevitable. But when it happens, the profession will take firm and fair actions to uphold its reputation and restore trust. This is the unenviable task of the SMC's Complaints Committees or Disciplinary Tribunals (DT). Doctors also need to be able to trust that the disciplinary system is a fair and transparent one, which produces consistent outcomes, and which sets and applies clear standards.

Amendments to the Medical Registration Bill 2020

This system of professional self-regulation will be strengthened through amendments to the Medical Registration Act, which will come into force in early 2022. Through the amendments, which includes establishing an inquiry committee to sieve frivolous or vexatious complaints, measures to increase the pool of persons available to sit on various disciplinary committees, and establishing a Disciplinary Commission to professionalise and preserve the independence of the DTs. These changes will make the disciplinary system more expeditious, consistent, proportionate, fair and independent.

Along with the amendments to the MRA, the SMC is also working on updating the SMC's Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines, or ECEG, and its accompanying handbook. Doctors are strongly encouraged to read the ECEG and the handbook. The latest revisions to the ECEG will reflect the changes in medical practice, for example, the increased use of telemedicine, that have emerged since the last revision in 2016. The revision to the ECEG will help to bring more certainty and clarity to the ethical practice of medicine.

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Closing

Society has a high regard for doctors. Some of the most obstinate people I know only listen to their doctors. Parents dreamt of their children becoming doctors. MOH wishes you an exciting career in medicine, rising up to the call of medicine, putting your patients before self, and in everything, doing no harm. Society has invested in you, and we hope you will give back to the community and serve to the best of your abilities.

We live in challenging times. It has been more than 20 months since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a long-drawn fight and Singaporeans are “battle-weary”, including our healthcare professionals. But I know your morale is kept high. Doctors are the bedrock of an effective healthcare system. As doctors, it is important to take care of your own well-being, both physically and mentally, so that you can continue to care for your patients. I encourage you to look out for and support one another to ride through this trying period.

Congratulations on reaching this milestone in your medical career. Remember the words of the oath you are about to take.

Thank you.



*NUP doctor seeing a patient in the polyclinic
Source: NUP*

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