

SMC News

The newsletter of the Singapore Medical Council



**SINGAPORE
MEDICAL
COUNCIL**
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A portrait of a man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and blue patterned tie. He is standing outdoors with green foliage in the background.

In Conversation with the new SMC Registrar

Event Highlights

SMC Pledge Ceremony 2014

Professional Matters

The Family Physician And Ethical Challenges



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Welcome to this edition of the SMC newsletter, *SMC News*.

It has been a year of changes as SMC welcomed a new Registrar, A/Prof Benjamin Ong, who took over from Prof K Satku on 1 January 2014. I wish A/Prof Ong all the best as the new Registrar and I would like to express my appreciation and thanks to Prof Satku for his years of dedication and service to the Council.

Under our event highlights, we feature the SMC Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony held in February 2014, which was attended by doctors on the threshold of full registration. This event seeks to reinforce the importance of professionalism and ethics to our new doctors and we have reproduced the speeches from this event for your reading.

SMC also welcomed a new Executive Secretary in April 2014 as the Council continues to make changes to enhance our processes. You will also find the results of the SMC Elections 2014 in this edition and we would like to thank all doctors for taking the time from your busy schedules to vote in this election.

I hope you will enjoy reading this edition of *SMC News* which provides some updates on the Council, the new SMC Registrar's profile and an opinion article on professional issues.

Professor Tan Ser Kiat
President, Singapore Medical Council

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Speeches – SMC Physician’s Pledge Affirmation Ceremony, 22 February 2014

Welcome Address by SMC President, Professor Tan Ser Kiat, at the SMC Physician’s Pledge Affirmation Ceremony

Welcome to this afternoon’s Physician’s Pledge Ceremony. As doctors, this is indeed an extremely important occasion in our professional lives as it signifies our universal commitment to caring for our patients, irrespective of our background.

The medical profession here has made very significant contributions to our healthcare services over the past five decades. Singapore’s healthcare services have been highly ranked by various international bodies. These include being ranked sixth best in the world by the WHO in 2000, the third best healthcare system and first in Crisis Preparation in Asia by PERC in 2003. Out of 57 countries, we have been ranked fourth by the Institute for Management Development (IMD). Singapore also boasts the second lowest infant mortality rate and our citizens enjoy one of the longest life expectancies in the world.

And we were able to do this in spite of spending around 4% of our GDP, with outcomes comparable to other developed countries which spend between 8 to 16% of their GDPs.

However, going forward, the profession faces many daunting challenges, such as a rapidly ageing population, the second fastest in Asia. We also face an increasingly well-informed and literate public with very high (sometimes unrealistic) expectations on treatment outcomes. Not forgetting leaps in medical technology and the effects of social media.

All these developments will pose major challenges to the way we practise, increasing the costs of care, ethical and moral issues, communications and the like.

However, they should not cloud or distract our primary mission of providing the best care possible to our patients and serving their interests and welfare.

The medical profession has been, and hopefully will always be, a highly regarded and respected profession by the public through the ages. Our service to our patients goes

beyond managing their health. It carries with it ethical and moral obligations in the course of our work and service to patients who place great trust and confidence in us. This special relationship has been eloquently put by the Court of Three Judges in one of their recent judgments and I quote:

“Indeed, the proposition that the spirit of public service and the existence of ethical obligations underpin all professional practice applies with equal (and, arguably, even greater) force to medical practitioners, whom we collectively entrust with our health, our well-being and, in certain instances, our lives. In this respect, the medical profession occupies a unique societal position of both great privilege and commensurate responsibility.”

By taking the Pledge today, you are making a lifelong commitment to your patients. I hope you will continue to uphold the trust and confidence placed upon you by your patients and their loved ones.

On behalf of my colleagues, I warmly welcome you into the fold of SMC and look forward to your contributions to help us bring the profession to the highest level, upholding the trust and respect the public have in us.

Thank you.



Speech by Director of Medical Services, A/Prof Benjamin Ong, at the SMC Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony

Introduction

Firstly, thank you to all for attending the SMC Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony. To the doctors here taking the pledge, I am pleased to join you today to mark this milestone in your careers as Director of Medical Services and SMC Registrar.

The Pledge that you take today defines the essence of our medical profession, and exemplifies the values that our profession holds to, and it is therefore, an important and significant occasion to commemorate with your family and friends.

Hard work to reach this stage in career

I know that you have all worked hard to reach this stage of achieving full registration in Singapore. You have also dedicated yourselves to the work of caring for patients in our hospitals and medical institutions.

Some of us come from different countries and cultures, and, on top of trying to learn how to treat patients, had to also understand our way of life so as to integrate into our healthcare system and deliver to our patients the best care possible.

For everyone, our journey in medicine involves sacrificing time with your family and friends to care for your patients. I know that some of you have even had to take time-off from hospital duties to attend today's ceremony.

Special profession

Regardless, let me say to you that it continues to be a great privilege to be a doctor in Singapore today. The medical profession here has been described as "a calling of the highest order" and one which "occupies a unique societal position of both great privilege and commensurate responsibility".

The first two lines in the introduction of SMC's Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines read: **"The medical profession has always been held in the highest esteem by the public, who look to their doctors for the relief of suffering and ailments. In modern medical practice, patients and society at large expect doctors to be responsible both to individual patients' needs as well as to the needs of the larger community."** Hence, it would be important for me to underscore what should guide our professional life.

While we should certainly be proud of our role as doctors, we need to remember that pride often destroys the esteem that society holds for us. Such inordinate or disproportionate valuing of our worth to the extent of not recognising the value of the contributions of others is what, to me, threatens our profession most. A few of our colleagues have even gone to the point of not valuing the patient who should always be central to what we do.

Humility, in contrast, allows us to understand that our talents and abilities are at their most effective when we realise the worth of our team members. It is such humility that we should anchor our practice on and we should aim to cultivate it in our relationships with our colleagues and patients. After all, we certainly cannot, individually, know everything nor perform all interventions independent of a team.

Therefore, I urge you to keep these thoughts in mind when you apply your knowledge and skills as doctors, as our society looks to you to fight diseases and get well.

The Pledge that you take today is one steeped in the tradition of the Hippocratic Oath taken by countless doctors through history. This Pledge reminds us of the calling to help others in an important way by curing the sick.

So, whenever you have doubts or come to a crossroad, always remember the time you were privileged to be in the position to help an elderly patient feel better or cured a sick child or, perhaps, saved a patient in the emergency ward. Such thoughts would then be good reminders of the very special profession we belong to, melding knowledge with empathy and compassion.

Fragmentation of care

Let me now cover something else which is of concern and acutely experienced by patients. This is the issue of "fragmentation of care" brought about by specialisation and working in disparate teams. Specialisation works if a patient has a single condition or problem, fixed by an operation or treatment that rids the patient of his pain and disease. Many, especially older patients, have multiple medical problems and in this setting, specialisation results in uncoordinated, fragmented care. Patients and their relatives regularly give feedback that they are upset that they have to see so many specialists and no one oversees holistic care.

Specialisation also aggravates medication use and patients face the problem of poly-pharmacy with attendant interactions and side effects. While the Ministry of Health will look into how we can evolve our care model to address this, such change means we will work and operate very differently, anchored on care managed by general physicians and family physicians. We must have the courage to make changes because the well-being of our patients should be our principal consideration.

I believe there will be many among you who will also aspire to be excellent family physicians and general physicians and I look forward to larger numbers of such doctors to provide non-fragmented holistic care even as our population ages. Holistic care from the patients' perspective, and what I shared earlier about our practice, should be anchored on our values, aligned with our Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines. Competent, compassionate and appropriate medical care will ensure that our patients suffer no harm and get the best outcome.

Conclusion

Finally, remember that the Pledge, the ethical code and our historical traditions form the foundation for the principles and responsibility of our profession. We, collectively, define this profession.

Without all your skills, training and dedication, there would be no capabilities to protect and cure patients. However, without humility, sincere compassion, morality and humanity to comfort and cure, we would not be able to apply our capabilities appropriately in our society.

I do hope that as you progress in your careers, you will not forget the lifetime of commitment to service to which we pledge ourselves today.

I would like to end with a quote: **“What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.”** The late, Nelson Mandela.

SMC Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony 2014

SMC held a Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony at the National University of Singapore Yong Siew Toh Conservatory on 22 February 2014. The pledge ceremony marks an important milestone in the careers of doctors at the threshold of obtaining full registration status. The pledge is a solemn oath which reminds doctors of their duties and responsibilities to patients and society. The new Director of Medical Services, A/Prof Benjamin Ong, provided the keynote address at the event. More than 300 doctors took the Physician's Pledge witnessed by family and friends.



In Conversation With The New SMC Registrar

A/Prof Benjamin Ong



A/Prof Benjamin Ong was appointed the new SMC Registrar on 1 January 2014.

SMC News interviewed A/Prof Ong to hear about his views on the medical profession and to find out more about him.

Q: What does the profession of Medicine mean to you?

The profession of Medicine is about doing the right thing in the interest of patients consistently - even when no one is looking over your shoulder. It is, now more so than ever, the one profession where the doctor has the opportunity to serve nobly. The 'right thing' is a loaded term as medicine is founded on Science, hence we have to deliver care based on evidence and do so consistently.

Q: What are the challenges facing doctors in Singapore today?

Rising patient and public expectations and the costs of new treatments and technologies are two areas of challenge that we face in our profession.

Q: What are some areas that our medical practitioners can strive towards/improve on?

We can certainly learn to take the patients' perspective more, to learn to really involve them a lot more in staying healthy. Communications remains an area that all of us doctors need to spend more energy and quality time on.

Q: What do you see as the role of the medical profession in the larger healthcare system?

Doctors are catalysts, leaders and effectors at all levels of our healthcare system. Hence, we need to realise that we are no longer 'expert artisans' alone, rewarded for our procedural skills, but we are key parts of the whole ecosystem that ensures our fellow citizens stay as healthy as possible. We need to be good at teamwork beyond our own specialty areas.

Q: Do you have any advice for young aspiring doctors out there?

Our profession is a lifelong marathon of continual learning. It is not about grades or degrees behind our names or how much we deserve to be paid. Search for an area of practice that gives you true satisfaction and where you have the aptitude. Above all, walk in the shoes of your patients!

Q: How do you spend quality time with your family?

I make time to chat with my wife and to have shared meals with my grown-up children. We try to travel together at least once a year.

Q: What do you read for leisure?

I actually read very widely. There is so much to learn that interests me. Magazines on technology, nature, travel are quick reads. I tend to read non-fiction books - in a wide range of topics - social sciences, history, human behaviour, religion.

Q: What are your hobbies?

I have always enjoyed sports - I enjoy skiing and walking in the countryside. Mountain biking had to be stopped after one too many falls. I still play squash twice a week. I also enjoy music.

Q: Who or what has inspired you most in your life?

My many mentors and teachers when I was younger. Some of them continue to be an inspiration even now. I am also inspired by people who have lived their lives demonstrating values of servant-hood consistently. My patients also serve as an inspiration - to do better and to find better ways to help.

The Family Physician And Ethical Challenges

The Family Physician (FP) Register was formally established in 2011. It serves to recognise doctors with Family Medicine (FM) training in Singapore. The aim of the Family Physician Register is to raise the overall standard of family medicine practice in Singapore. With this register and the Primary Care Masterplan launched in 2010, the primary care landscape began to change in Singapore.

Specialist or Generalist

With the FP register and better recognition comes a dilemma for the FPs. Are we specialists since we are now better trained in generalist medicine? The way our specialist colleagues see us, the way we see ourselves as well as the way society see us are all key determinants.

With better trained Family Physicians offering higher quality services, public expectation of healthcare and outcomes will go in tandem. When we do not live up to expectations, complaints alleging wrong representation may arise.

Promising unrealistic outcomes or charging unrealistically low fees will also expose us to much unhappiness among the population.

Delivery Model and Business

The FP Register is meant to identify General Practitioners (GPs) who have gone through extra training. The primary care delivery model will change for the better. With a clearer differentiation in quality, delivery and facilities, there will always be a price differential.

One possible result is for the FPs to charge more for their higher quality or for the GPs to start charging lower to survive. Over time, it will reach equilibrium.

The GP model may not be viable except to deliver managed health care and company contract services. With this scenario, the GP may be challenged on all fronts when he tries to balance the books.

Primary Care Landscape

The business environment will also shape primary care practices and facilities. We can foresee more consolidation among Family Physicians to enjoy greater economies of scale and more competition in bidding for prime clinic locations.

They may add more facilities such as DRP machines, treadmill ECGs, spirometry and others to their practices. The danger to over consume and not be evidence-based may become real.

Government Funded Schemes

Various government funded aid schemes have been introduced recently to ensure that patients can afford the higher quality private primary healthcare. In our zeal to help the poor and needy, some of us may be tempted to breach existing rules and regulations. We need to preserve our integrity even when we seek to help.

Policy

Based on overseas experience, authorities usually link aid schemes to the qualification of practitioners. If implemented in Singapore, this would encourage more GPs to be trained as Family Physicians. However, this may also give rise to creative means of circumventing these restrictions to receive the subsidies.

Every new and innovative change will require us to search our hearts and review our ethical duty as practitioners. It will serve our profession and society well when we are prepared for them.

Dr Leong Choon Kit
SMC Council Member

New Executive Secretary for SMC

The SMC welcomed a new Executive Secretary, Mrs Joanna Tan, from 1 April 2014. Joanna takes over from A/Prof Chew Suok Kai and Dr Lau Hong Choon who will continue to advise the Council in their roles as Deputy Registrar and Medical Advisor respectively.

SMC warmly welcomes Joanna and thanks A/Prof Chew and Dr Lau for their service as Executive Secretaries.

SMC Elections 2014 Results

The SMC held an election from 21 May to 3 June 2014 to fill seven (7) positions in the Council.

A total of 8 candidates stood for the election. Out of a total of 8434 fully registered doctors who were eligible to vote, 8269 doctors (i.e. 98%) cast their votes. The number of votes received by each candidate who stood for the elections is as follows:

Candidate's Names	Number of Votes
Dr Chen Suet Ching Jeanette	2,668
Asst. Prof Chua Swee Boon Raymond	2,691
Prof Fock Kwong Ming	2,837
Adj. Asst. Prof Koura Aaryan Nath	1,409
A/Prof Low Cheng Ooi	3,314
A/Prof Ng Wei Keong Alan	2,911
Dr Tan Chi Chiu	3,543
Dr Thirumoorthy Thamotharampillai	4,025



The following 7 candidates with the highest number of votes have accordingly been elected to serve for a term of 3 years, with effect from 9 June 2014.

Dr Chen Suet Ching Jeanette
Asst. Prof Chua Swee Boon Raymond
Prof Fock Kwong Ming
A/Prof Low Cheng Ooi
A/Prof Ng Wei Keong Alan
Dr Tan Chi Chiu
Dr Thirumoorthy Thamotharampillai

SMC would like to thank all the candidates who participated in the elections.

Feedback

If you have any feedback or comments on any articles in this newsletter, please contact us at smc_newsletter@smc.gov.sg

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