

SMC News

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In Conversation with A/Prof Pang Weng Sun

Event Highlights

February 2015 Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony

Professional Matters

The Disciplinary Framework: What does it mean when a doctor becomes the subject of a disciplinary complaint?



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Welcome to this 4th edition of the SMC newsletter – **SMC News**.

In this edition, we profile our Council member A/Prof Pang Weng Sun, Vice-Dean (Clinical Affairs) at Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine and a senior physician with a keen interest in elderly care, to find out more about him and his views on the medical profession.

SMC News will also help to explain the disciplinary process and what happens when a doctor becomes the subject of a disciplinary complaint.

Under our event highlights, we feature the SMC Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony held in February 2015 where Minister of State for Health, Dr Lam Pin Min was our Guest of Honour.

This issue also updates on the completion of alignment for the practising certificate validity and qualifying periods.

Lastly, we would like to request all doctors to update your personal particulars including email addresses and contact details with SMC so that you can receive important notifications.

I hope you will enjoy reading this edition of SMC News.

Professor Tan Ser Kiat
President, Singapore Medical Council

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Speeches – SMC Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony – 28 February 2015

Welcome Address by SMC President, Professor Tan Ser Kiat

On behalf of the Council, let me welcome all of you to this afternoon's Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony. To the doctors taking this Pledge, this represents a very important event in your professional career.

I would like to thank our Minister of State for Health, Dr Lam Pin Min as well as members of the healthcare fraternity who are here today to witness and celebrate this occasion. I am deeply encouraged to see so many talented individuals coming here today to dedicate and commit themselves to this noble profession by taking this very important Pledge.

The practice of Medicine has dated back thousands of years and has always been highly regarded by society as an honourable and highly respected Profession. I hope you will honour this Pledge through your work and conduct and not betray the trust bestowed on you by society.

The Physician's Pledge

The SMC Physician's Pledge is an adaptation of the Declaration of Geneva by the World Medical Association in 1948 based on the original Hippocratic Oath, a historic document that is regarded as the world's first Code of Ethics. As most of you know, this oath was created by Hippocrates, also widely known as the "Father of Medicine". Hippocrates is an ancient Greek physician who is said to have lived a professional life of outstanding moral and ethical values. This oath represents the ideals

of the selfless dedication to the welfare of patients, the preservation of human life and code of conduct of physicians of the highest order.

This oath has been taken by succeeding generations of doctors, pledging to uphold specific values, ethical standards and honourable conduct in their service to patients and not be swayed by other interests. It is steeped in tradition and represents the very essence of the medical profession. Today it is your honour and privilege to take this solemn oath in the form of the SMC Physician's Pledge in the presence of your peers, colleagues, friends and family.

I hope you will take this pledge seriously with pride and honour upholding the values and principles it espouses; such as service to humanity, respect for teachers, putting patients' interest first, patient confidentiality and adherence to the SMC's Ethical Code. This Pledge will serve as your guide especially in times of professional, moral and ethical dilemmas. Hence you must honour this Pledge for the rest of your professional life and career.

Next Stage in your career

For some of you who are still in the early stage of your career, the Singapore Medical Council looks forward to working with you to achieve our objectives in promoting the safety and improving the health of the public and upholding the profession's reputation under the Medical Registration Act.

You must be conversant with the SMC's Ethical Code on acceptable professional practice and behaviours of doctors. These are standards by which your professional conduct will be measured and judged. As you are aware, you will also need to keep yourself professionally updated through Continuing Medical Education and skills upgrades.

The SMC alone cannot maintain the public confidence in the medical profession as it is all our collective responsibility to uphold the standards and values which make our profession so well regarded and respected in Singapore.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, as you continue on this journey in medicine, I hope that you will realise that it is as much a personal journey as well as a professional one. Your skills, personality and inclinations, especially for the younger ones, will help to guide you on which particular fields to pursue in medicine. Whichever specific choice you make, do not be in a rush and do not feel pressured when making career decisions. Take time to understand yourself and your strengths and weaknesses so that you can make the appropriate choice of specialty to go into. It will be good for you to experience the various areas of medicine, better understand the requirements of the various specialties and hone your clinical acumen and skills before you decide on developing your expertise in a particular area.



"Just as life is about the journey more than the destination, your medical career is a journey of life-long learning with no end goal in sight."

Just as life is about the journey more than the destination, your medical career is a journey of life-long learning with no end goal in sight. Medicine is also about the selfless dedication to the service of society rather than the pursuit of financial gain or personal fame. If you approach your career with this awareness of your interests and strengths as well as society's expectations of the profession, with good values, patience and hard work, I have no doubt that each of you will find fulfilment and satisfaction in your career.

On this note, may I wish all of you a most fulfilling career which you can look back later with great satisfaction and achievements.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to also thank Minister of State for Health, Dr Lam Pin Min again for taking time off his busy schedule to be here as our Guest of Honour. It is now my pleasure to invite Dr Lam to address us.

Thank you.

Speech by Guest of Honour Dr Lam Pin Min, Minister of State for Health

It is my pleasure to be here this afternoon to witness your affirmation of the Singapore Medical Council's Physician's Pledge. You are about to fulfil one of the key requirements of obtaining full medical registration.

You have worked hard to reach this stage in your life and you should celebrate this moment with your family and friends. The Pledge that you will be taking embodies the values of our profession and I would like to congratulate you for being here to participate in this occasion.

Character of a Doctor

The Physician's pledge is a reminder to doctors that they have a privileged place in society. The skills and knowledge you have acquired place you in a position of trust and respect. Society not only has high expectations of your professional expertise, but also of your values, conduct, character and attitudes. Doctors too, desire to succeed in life and to make a name for themselves. There is the potential lure of fame and fortune. With this comes the test of a doctor's values and character. It is therefore my hope that the words of the Physician's pledge will remain as a guide in your professional career to always put the patient's interests first and to do no harm.

Changes in the Medical Landscape

The medical landscape within Singapore is also rapidly changing. Most of you have received your training from various medical institutions around the world and bring a different perspective to the practice of medicine here. At the same time, you will need to adapt to the local culture and practices to care for your patients.

Regardless of where we come from or how different our backgrounds may be, our goal is the same; that is to do our best for the patient and to comfort and cure to the best of our abilities. The changing landscape requires that we work as part of a team. It is



Guest of Honour, Dr Lam Pin Min, Minister of State for Health, addressing the doctors

therefore important to recognise the skills and expertise of other healthcare professionals such as nurses and allied health professionals and work closely with them to achieve the best care possible for our patients.

Challenges Ahead

However challenging the profession may be, it does come with its rewards. With globalisation, technological advancements and changing societal needs, doctors today work in an exciting and fast paced environment with new treatments, cures and medical innovations arising constantly. I urge you to keep up with these advancements and to constantly upgrade your skills and knowledge.

With the increased availability of information via the internet and social media, doctors now find themselves in an environment where patients are better informed and are in a position to have deeper and more meaningful discussions with regards to their symptoms, diagnosis and

“Spend the time, even though it may be difficult given today's fast paced environment, to carefully listen to the patient so as to fully understand his or her concerns and wishes. It is important to put ourselves in the shoes of patients and see their perspectives and empathise with them.”

medical treatment. This also poses a challenge to the medical practitioner to be able to provide relevant and up-to-date information and dispel the myths circulating online that can get in the way of effective evidence-based medical treatment.

When you inevitably encounter complicated and challenging situations from time to time, remember that you are not alone and that you can always call on the guidance and assistance of senior doctors and other healthcare colleagues to advise you on the challenges you face.

Despite the hard work and challenges, one of the most rewarding aspects of our job as doctors is when we see our patients recover and get well after treatment. We then know that we have made a difference in their lives and done our part to serve humanity.

Communication is Key

Now I would like to address another important subject - communication. Critical to the success of the doctor-patient relationship is that doctors' communication must be adequate and appropriate for patients who should be treated with respect and empathy. Good communication skills and involving patients in the decision making process will enhance patient satisfaction

and improve the doctor-patient relationship.

It is important that doctors see their patient as a person and not in terms of diseases and cases. So talk to your patients and explain to them clearly their conditions and proposed treatment plans and discuss the outcome and risks. Spend the time, even though it may be difficult given today's fast paced environment, to carefully listen to the patient so as to fully understand his or her concerns and wishes. It is important to put ourselves in the shoes of patients and see their perspectives and empathise with them. This not only improves the doctor-patient relationship but can also improve patient outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is my hope that you take the words of this pledge, which embodies the spirit of the medical profession, as a reminder of your responsibilities to society as doctors.

I would like to urge you to work hard in building up your clinical and medical skills to be the best doctor you can be, while at the same time practising the fundamental values and ethical principles which make the medical profession noble.

With this, I congratulate you on reaching this milestone, and I wish you a fulfilling and meaningful career ahead.

SMC Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony 2015

SMC held the first Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony for the year at the National University of Singapore Yong Siew Toh Conservatory on 28 February 2015. 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 Minister

of State for Health, Dr Lam Pin Min was our Guest of Honour and delivered the keynote address at the event. More than 300 doctors took the Physician's Pledge witnessed by family and friends.



Doctors celebrating the occasion at the post-ceremony reception



Doctors posing for a picture before the ceremony



Guest of Honour Dr Lam Pin Min, Minister of State for Health, at the post-ceremony reception with Dr Jayamanna Champika Perera and family



Dr Alex Tan Wei Xian leading the SMC Physician's Pledge with SMC Council members

In Conversation With A/Prof Pang Weng Sun

SMC News interviewed our Council member, A/Prof Pang Weng Sun, Vice-Dean (Clinical affairs) at Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine and a senior physician with a keen interest in elderly care, to find out more about him and get his views on some of the challenges doctors face in the changing healthcare landscape.

What does it mean to be a doctor for you?

I have the privilege of getting to know people and their families, share some of their joys, hurt and pain and hopefully contribute to making their journey in life a little better. And helping families build positive and pleasant memories of their loved ones.

As you have a keen interest in the aging population issues, what kind of professional challenges would doctors face and how can they help the elderly?

I see 3 main areas – the first is that we need to learn to manage multiple co-morbidities and polypharmacy and understand the interactions between different illnesses, drugs, mental and physical function. Second is to understand the mind of the older person – his or her concerns, preferences and adjust management plans to meet his or her needs. Thirdly, we need to develop appropriate health and social services and help them navigate through them.

How can doctors deal with the rising patient expectations and rapidly evolving healthcare landscape?

We certainly can improve our care delivery processes but we will never be able to meet everyone's expectations, so it is really about communications and arriving at some reasonable consensus on care.



“I suppose humanity is the heart and soul of medicine. I have observed and learnt that from senior clinicians who have taught and inspired me – clinicians who combine astute knowledge of medicine with understanding and compassion.”

What is your advice for young aspiring doctors?

You started with idealistic dreams when you entered medical school – do not give up on them. Keep striving to be a better doctor each day. There is always more we can learn and things we can do better. Continually refine your art and skills in whatever specialty or role you are in.

What are your hobbies?

I am afraid I do not manage my time very well but I do enjoy travelling to quieter places and enjoy nature and wandering in parks.

We understand you received the Healthcare Humanity Award in 2005. How important is the value of humanity to medicine and patient care?

I suppose humanity is the heart and soul of medicine. I have observed and learnt that from senior clinicians who have taught and inspired me – clinicians who combine astute knowledge of medicine with understanding and compassion.

How do you balance your busy work schedule with your family time?

I am not very good at work-life balance but I do have a wonderful wife and daughter who put up with me and I do treasure the moments we spend together.

The Disciplinary Framework: What Does It Mean When A Doctor Becomes The Subject Of A Disciplinary Complaint?

As Singapore's medical regulator, the Singapore Medical Council ("SMC") is tasked with the duty of regulating the conduct and ethics, as well as the standards of practice, of registered medical practitioners in Singapore. One aspect of the discharge of SMC's regulatory functions is the medical disciplinary process as set out in the Medical Registration Act ("MRA").

By touching on some key aspects of the medical disciplinary process, this article attempts to shed some light on the framework. Diagram 1 (below) provides a snapshot that a complaint takes after it has been filed with the SMC.

Why Am I Asked To Explain My Conduct?

It is at times suggested that some of the complaints filed are without merit and ought to be summarily dismissed without having the matter referred to a Complaints Committee (CC). Such observations are not without merit and one can, at times, empathise with such a point of view.

However, because the legislative framework is such that SMC does not have a broad and overriding discretion to summarily dismiss a complaint on its own without referring it to the CC, generally speaking, all complaints, however frivolous or vexatious they might appear to be, has to be placed before an independently-convened CC which is then tasked to consider how best to deal with the matter.

This is not, in itself, a bad thing: the integrity of the framework lies in the fact that an independent body assesses the merit of the complaint; a system in which SMC is able to summarily dismiss a complaint without having the matter assessed independently runs the risk of being criticised for lacking accountability and sufficient checks and balances.

Some practitioners who have been the subject of a complaint may have expressed reservations about being made to respond to complaints which, in their view, involve either unmeritorious or false allegations. This can lead to significant distress to the medical practitioner, especially when they are uncertain as to whether such an invitation to provide an explanation serves as an indicator that the CC deems the complaint to be of merit. Such concerns and fears are both reasonable and understandable.

However, it may be useful to highlight that from SMC's experience, such letters do not typically serve as any indicator of the merit (or lack thereof) of the complaint, and does not necessarily suggest that the CC has come to the view that the medical professional had acted inappropriately. Indeed, most cases that the CC dismisses are only done so after investigations have been undertaken (which would typically include obtaining the written explanation from the medical practitioner).

Such a letter written on behalf of the CC to a medical practitioner under investigation should therefore be seen for what it is, namely a means for the CC to obtain the perspective of the medical practitioner on the matter in question as a means to assess the most appropriate course of action.

The invitation to explain extended to the medical practitioner is therefore not an indictment of the medical practitioner; nor does it suggest that the CC has concluded that the medical practitioner has committed any infraction worth sanctioning, or that the matter would be sent for an inquiry before the Disciplinary Tribunal (DT) as a matter of course.

Commonly Asked Questions

Some common questions that medical practitioners who are subject to a complaint being handled by the SMC complaints process may have, and the SMC's responses to such queries, are as follows.

Q: What documents are provided to me when my written explanation is sought?

The CC will provide sufficient documentation which, in its view, is necessary for you to provide your written explanation. This will include a copy of the complaint and statutory declaration (where applicable).

Q: How long am I typically given to respond to such a request for a written explanation?

You are given at least 21 days to provide your written explanation. If you find that a response by this time may not be feasible, you can write in formally seeking an extension of time to respond, setting out the reasons as to why you require more time.

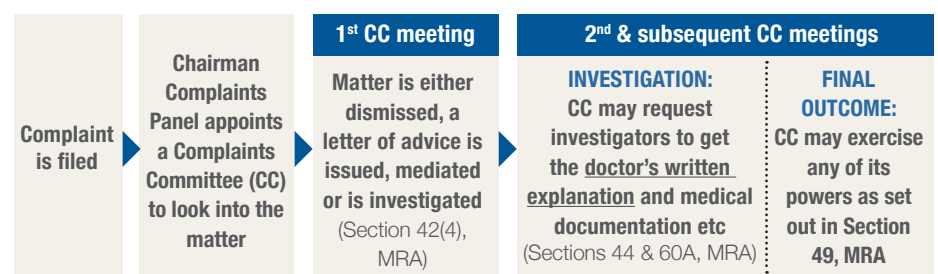


Diagram 1: Snapshot of a typical disciplinary matter
(Note: Individual cases may vary)

Q: Do I have a right to be heard personally by the CC?

Under the MRA, the medical practitioner under investigation does not have the right to be heard in person or through oral representations by a legal representative.

Q: I received a letter seeking my written explanation in relation to a particular complaint. Would it be possible for me to attach confidential documentary evidence and medical records to support my rendition of events?

Yes. While we are unable to provide advice on your right to use or disclose individual pieces of documents (for which you may wish to seek legal advice), proceedings before the CC are confidential. All documentary evidence and medical records that you provide (when directed by the CC through the investigators) will be considered in deciding the appropriate course of action in relation to the complaint.

Q: I have been informed by the complainant that they have withdrawn their complaint. Does that mean that the disciplinary process comes to an end?

Under the MRA, even when the complainant withdraws the complaint, the SMC retains residual power, if appropriate, to direct the CC to continue to consider the complaint as if such withdrawal has not been made.

Q: What is (and who decides) the composition of the CC that handles my complaint?

Each CC comprises three individuals, an SMC Council member, a medical practitioner and a lay individual. These individuals are appointed by the Chairman of the Complaints Panel, who is an SMC Council member. The CC does not take any instructions from the SMC and acts independently of it.

Q: I received correspondence to inform me that I would be issued with a letter of advice / letter of warning. What does this mean and will that information be provided to third parties? If so, who?

The letter of advice and letter of warning are but two possible outcomes of the disciplinary process before the CC. While there are a variety of situations under which such letters can be issued, they are typically issued where the CC is of the view that no disciplinary infraction had been committed but where there were some improvements that could be made in the medical practitioner's medical practice and/or where a disciplinary infraction had been committed but the circumstances are such that it is not of sufficient gravity to warrant a disciplinary hearing. Please rest assured the fact that a medical practitioner has received such a letter is confidential and is not disclosed or released by SMC to external parties, unless it is required to do so by law.

Q: Will I be able to find out who served on the CC handling the complaint against me?

In the written correspondence that sets out the final decision of the CC,

the names of all the three members of the CC would be set out.

Conclusion

The continued confidence of the public in the integrity of the medical profession underscores the fact that an overwhelming majority of our members adhere to the values of the profession. The disciplinary framework complements such a framework by making sure that those who fail to live up to their expected obligations and responsibilities as medical professionals are sanctioned and dealt with. That a large majority of complaints filed against medical practitioners are eventually either dismissed or summarily dealt with without the need for a formal inquiry by way of proceedings before a DT suggests that the CC process has effectively served to sieve out unmeritorious cases and those for which a full-blown inquiry would be either inappropriate or unnecessary.

The process of explaining one's conduct by way of a written explanation is admittedly often unpleasant as such complaints typically allege significant wrongdoing on the medical practitioner's part. However, as can be seen from the discussion above, the opportunity to provide a written explanation serves as a useful platform for those who are the subject of a disciplinary investigation to provide the CC with a different perspective of the matter in question and the facts alleged in the complaint.

Things To Note

Completion of Alignment of Practising Certificate Validity Period and Qualifying Period

The alignment of the Practising Certificate (PC) validity period to the current Qualifying Period (QP) was completed on 31 December 2014. As of 1 January 2015, the provisions for pro-rating PC fees and for the waiver of Continuing Medical Education (CME) points for doctors have accordingly ceased. Doctors are reminded that, moving forward, they would need to attain the requisite CME points as set out in the Medical Registration Regulations to renew their PCs.

Monitoring of Personal CME Report

Please also be informed that, as of 1 January 2015, SMC will not be sending out reminders to registered medical practitioners on their CME status. Doctors are advised to check their personal CME report regularly to monitor their CME status for each qualifying period by logging on to the SMC website (www.smc.gov.sg) using their user ID and password, and clicking on the tab "Monitoring of CPE".

Update your particulars and contact details with SMC

We would like to request doctors to always update your particulars including contact details and email address with us if there are any changes so that you can be updated on the latest news on PC renewals, elections and guidelines for doctors. Simply login to our SMC website (www.smc.gov.sg) using your MCR (Medical Registration) number and password to view your particulars; and if any update is required, please do so by filling an application through the system to have your changes (such as contact details, email address and practice address) updated by SMC. Thank you for partnering SMC in ensuring your records are current and up-to-date!